

THE DOOR
OF THE
DOUBLE
DRAGON

by

HECTOR BLANDING



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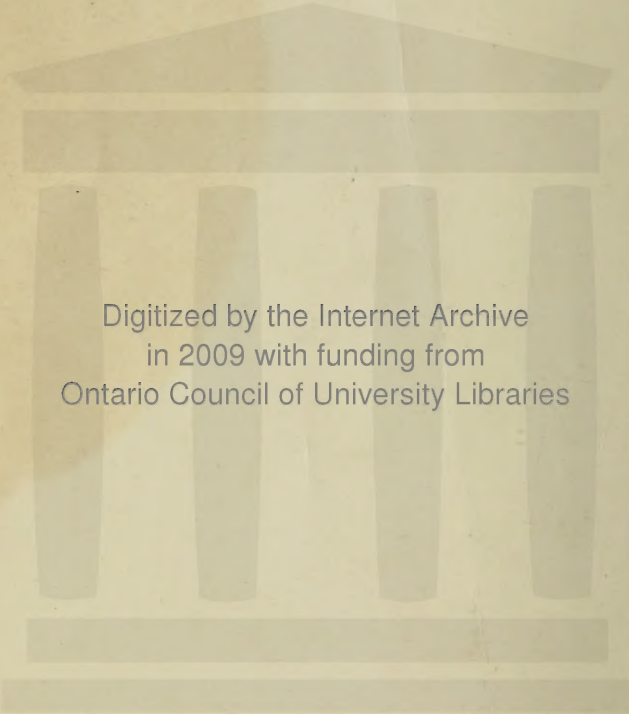
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THE DOOR OF THE
DOUBLE DRAGON



The blood rushed to her head; her whole body was strained. The door was gradually closing.

THE DOOR OF THE DOUBLE DRAGON

*A Romance of the China
of Yesterday and To-day*

BY
HECTOR BLANDING

Frontispiece by
GEORGE W. GAGE



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PROLOGUE

I

AT THE COUNTRY-CLUB

IT had been snowing steadily all day, the fall ceasing only with the dusk. The Flemish villages and Queen Anne cottages along Club Road were festooned with the flakes and in front of the Ren-shaws' some boys had built a snow-fort. The Ren-shaws always closed their house for the winter and went into town, so that there was no one to disturb the fort-builders.

One of the builders, a Hampden hoodlum, who hung about the gates of The Roland Park Country Club to hold horses or buckle on skates, had joined the youngsters and was directing their efforts. The snow-fort finished, he elected to stay behind it with the larger boys and to make of the others an attacking party. The latter having suffered severely for some time now demanded that they become the fort's defenders. This project falling through they began the

manufacture of munitions pending an emergency. Meanwhile there were the passers-by.

A number of people passed, but they were members of the club, personally known by both hoodlum and boys. It was not deemed wise to offend these. A negro servant, however, not so fortunate, fled toward Roland Avenue with smarting face. At the corner she paused to hurl back at her youthful assailants heated promises that the Olympians should soon be made aware of their sons' associations with "that there po' white trash."

The hoodlum recognizing and hotly resenting this characterization of himself by one of a subject race, scowled heavily and, reaching down and digging up a large and jagged stone, made a compact ball of snow about it and promised darkly:

"Wait 'til that dinge comes back."

Some of the boys demurred. It was not fair to put stones in snowballs. "You might hurt somebody, Jerry," urged a flaxen-haired youngster in a Scotch cap.

"Oh, mamma!" jeered Jerry.

The flaxen-haired youngster pulled his Scotch cap over his eyes and stalked away, followed by several of his friends.

"Let the sissies go."

Jerry, a youth of some sixteen years, large framed, heavy-jawed, laughed mockingly, and rolled the snow about the jagged stone all the tighter.

The hoodlum and his like, many of whom hung about the gates of the Caddie House of the country Club, were a different species from the Roland Park boys. He came from Hampden, a factory suburb a mile or so nearer the city. Compelled to attend school by what his kind and their parents resented as unreasonable laws preventing them from profitable employment until they were fifteen, they were found in the vicinity of Club Road after school hours, for here were to be had odd jobs; and often steady afternoon work as caddies and toboggan attendants. Jerry had held both jobs but had been discharged for insolence to club members. "Wasn't he just as good as they was?" On the other hand he was savagely indignant at any similar claim of equality on the part of fellow-caddies of the color of the fleeing servant because of whose criticism he was reserving the jagged stone.

Misfortune had made a different reservation for that stone-snowball which Jerry was now carefully soaking in the gutter the ice coating of which Jerry had broken. The water-soaked snow rapidly congealed; long before the servant left the grocery with

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basket filled, the snow had frozen until it was as hard without as the stone within.

Returning at the head of his wildly whooping band from an enforced retreat by two department-store delivery boys, whom misfortune had compelled to leave parcels at the club, Jerry spied a person for whom it had been decreed that murderous projectile of his should have been made.

"Hefting" the hard, heavy, stone snow-ball Jerry could no longer deny himself the pleasure of hurting somebody. Especially as that somebody looked unable to avenge himself.

"There's our meat, fellows," he yelled in savage abandon. "To the right, wheel! 'Tenshun! Aim at the enemy—the Chink."

It was an odd, pathetic little figure that Jerry indicated—an undersized Chinese. A quality of white-stockinged ankle showed beneath a rich and capacious robe of heavily quilted Shantung silk. On his head was a little black skull-cap.

"Aim at that red button," whispered Jerry. "There on his cap. See who can knock it off first; one, two three! Fire!"

The Chinese continued to approach, hands huddled tight in the long loose sleeves of his robe, head bent.

Unaware of his peril; unaware indeed of any on-lookers, he was too absorbed in his own dreary thoughts to heed the sudden "Fire!" So that the attack on him came so suddenly and unexpectedly that he made no attempt to protect himself.

Ball after ball of the hard snow struck him, stinging ears and nose, breaking against his teeth as his mouth gaped open. Vividly-colored streaks of light blinded him.

Stunned, he stumbled and fell to his knees, his hands instinctively upraised.

This was a sport after Jerry's mean coward heart; inflicting pain upon the helpless. He had waited, gloating, for the others to disconcert and dismay with their snow-balls until the victim would be sufficiently stunned to be still and his own aim thus rendered absolutely accurate. Not until then did he fling his murderous missile.

It struck the little Chinaman in the exact center of his forehead. The others, each of whom had compressed another handful of snow, paused, then flung them away. A cry of alarm arose. The Chinese had staggered against the Renshaws' brick wall clutching at the dead ivy. He brought down two handfuls as he fell, a long gash in his forehead gushing out the

veriest flood. The sanguinary red stained his forehead, ran into his eyes, making him a sightless thing. His mouth was a red smear.

The boys drew back, some angry, all afraid, one or two looking accusingly at Jerry.

"You cowards! You dirty, despicable cowards!"

A whirlwind was among them. They were being bowled about, falling right and left as a bowling-ball scatters ninepins.

"Who did it? Who did it? Oh, you nasty dirty little rats. Don't try to run off, you, Bobby Dalgren. You either, Vincent Bates."

Now that Jerry heard the voice, instead of feeling the mob-terror of his young companions, he began to snigger insolently. After all it was only a girl. He looked closer: why it was only a damn' Red. He began to jostle his way toward her. Old helpless Chinese and young helpless girls—anything helpless—was, as Jerry expressed it, "his meat."

"Hey! what's all this here?" he wanted to know.

Had he taken a longer look at the blazing brown eyes of the girl who had just dismounted from the horse, whose head she had turned in among them—which was why it had seemed a whirlwind—he would have hardly dared dismiss "Brown Bess" as "a damn' kid." True, he was a year or so older but she was

curiously well-muscled and well-formed; girls of fourteen are apt to be weak, overgrown, gangling.

This one wasn't. Had it not been for a crop of tangled brown curls, negligently drawn back and tied with ribbon at the nape of the neck; that, and her unmistakably girlish voice, she might easily been mistaken for—rather too good-looking a boy. Especially, as below the skirts of her riding-coat appeared a section of Bedford cord riding breeches laced tightly at her thin knees.

"Who did it? Come on now. You'd better tell me, Ben Cavendish."

She addressed the boy of the flaxen curls who had withdrawn at the sight of Jerry's jagged stone. He was now rejoining the party, his eyes reflecting something of the angry scorn in those of Bess Courtney's.

But they did not have the same ominous gleam.

Scenting an ally, she asked less threateningly: "Who did it, Ben?" Their two heads, flaxen poll and brown crop of curls, had been bent over the ensanguined face of the unconscious Oriental where he lay, strangely and pathetically still. Ben Cavendish's face caught something of the same red stain as the girl's, whose color blazed high through her oddly brown skin.

Brown skin, not tanned but brown; brown eyes—

red-brown like her chestnut crop of curls; it was no wonder they called little Miss Courtney "Brown Bess."

"I'll tell you," said little Flaxen-Poll quietly. The color had fled his cheeks now; they were strangely pale, for he was remembering. Is it strange with Jerry scowling at him, Jerry the best-known bully of small boys between Roland Park and Hampden; the one most skilled in the tortures of twisted wrists and bent back head?

"Tell me, Bennie."

The little boy's forefinger straightened out as it indicated the sullen-eyed Jerry, who, arms hanging gorilla-like, moved a pace or two toward his small accuser.

But Bentinck Cavendish had the blood of many splendid sires behind him and although his voice trembled, he still accused:

"We were only only throwing snow-balls, Bess. Honest we were. He put a stone in his. That's why I quit playing with him. None of us had stones in ours, did we, fellows?"

They answered a confirming chorus; then, they, too, pointed out the hulking fellow. With a snarl he came at them. The next moment a riding-crop came at him. With a roar he threw himself at its wielder.

But, her eyes blazing, her sturdy arm began to rise and fall so fast that eyes could not follow. It stung him again, again and again. Despite his rushes he never got near enough to pluck it from its wielder and turn it against her. Soon he was ceasing to rush and was retreating, raising his voice in the bellow of a savage but cowed animal. Then, quite suddenly, a blow was miscalculated, and the riding-crop's snake-wood handle, instead of its leather loop, thudded against his hard skull.

He dropped like a butcher-stricken ox.

"You've killed him, Bess! You've killed him!"

The girl put out a small spurred boot and pushed the body out of the way. "I wish I had," she said fiercely. "The low coward."

The jingle of sleigh-bells approaching had ceased when the thrashing of Jerry began and a sleigh had pulled up at the curb. A blond young man in English tweeds now tossed off the lap-robe and, throwing the reins to his companion, approached the girl. She was kneeling beside the prostrate Chinese, touching his wound with a bit of cambric handkerchief. One tan gauntlet had been flung down in the snow while she was performing this errand of mercy; the stained riding-crop lay alongside. The blond young man picked up both.

"Hello, Bess! Did you lay him out, too?" He indicated the Oriental.

She turned and frowned at him.

"Oh! You, Frank! I'm glad you've come. You see what's happened? Who's in that sleigh with you?"

"A West Point cadet—Wrenne—in Jim's class."

She did not appear interested. "Will you and Mr. Wrenne carry this poor man to your sleigh, and take him to my house. Go ahead, Frank! Don't stop to think about it."

He beckoned Wrenne and between them the Chinese was helped into the sleigh.

"You'll have to get out," said the girl, addressing the West Pointer. "Go back to the club and wait till Frank has taken him to my house. Will you please hurry?"

The other youth got out. Emory put the lap-robe about the Chinese, chirruped to his horse, and the sleigh was off. The girl's horse, which had been standing quite quietly during the whole affair, looked at his mistress with inquiring eyes.

"Come, help me up," she said to Wrenne.

He made a cup of his palms, into which she put her foot for the slightest second; then, with a salute of her riding-crop, pelted after Emory, leaving

Wrenne with a confused vision of tangled brown curls, healthy, flushed cheeks, a thin, girlish form, and magnificent eyes, that had no shrinking in them. He watched her as she turned into Roland Avenue, seemingly a part of her brown mare, supple, swaying. Then he turned to the quiet group of little boys gathered around the prostrate Jerry.

II

BLACK WRENNE

JERRY had a number of bruises, and one cut. Industrious rubbing of snow had had its effect, and he was groaning and coming out of his unconsciousness. He arose to look into the eyes of young Hamilton Wrenne.

“Damn that——”

Wrenne had a curiously dangerous look when he chose. Jerry decided not to be explicit in his damnation. He slouched off toward Roland Avenue, and Wrenne went back to the Country Club to join the tea-drinking crowd that sat before the huge brick fireplace, where great logs sputtered and crackled, and sent thousands of little red sparks dancing up the chimney. As he sat there, he took from his pocket a bit of cambric stained with blood. He stared at it for some time, and at the monogram in one corner—“E. C.” Presently he went below to the lavatory, and washed the cambric carefully in one of the bowls. Wringing it out, he folded it and put it back in his pocket.

With his resumption of his seat by the fireplace, he lit a cigarette and continued to meditate. He did not know any of the people at the club, for he was not a Baltimore man, but a guest of Frank Emory, whose brother had been in his class at the Point.

But Hamilton Wrenne was not one of those strangers to go unnoticed. His youth was not patent. He was scarcely past his twenty-first birthday, but he looked much older, due to his excessive darkness and his heavy growth of beard and mustache, which, although carefully shaven, was evident in the hardness of his cheeks and upper lip.

He was dark in the manner peculiar to English-speaking races. No one would have mistaken him for a Latin. He was an atavism, a recurrence of the strain of black Danes who had first ravaged, then defended, England. His hair was quite black, his complexion swarthy but clear. He had a hawk-nose and firm lips, and a certain boldness was in his dark-blue eyes. Less than six feet in height, he carried himself with so easy an erectness that he appeared taller.

He had just finished his cigarette when Frank Emory returned, and drew another armchair up beside him. Stretching his arms, he ungloved his hands and rubbed them before the fire.

"Might as well take dinner here now, Hammy," he said. "It'll be too late to get home in time to dress. They're to have the Yarnells and some others there to-night, and they'll expect us to show some open front. The club for me."

Wrenne acquiesced. They sent a servant for a bill of fare, ordered, and sat back, smoking.

"Who was the girl, Frank?" Wrenne asked.

"Oh! Brown Bess! Miss Elizabeth Courtney, if you like that better. Won't she be a lulu when she grows up? She's only about sixteen now! Why, she's Austin Courtney's sister. Austin's the paying-teller at the Iron Bank. Awfully good family, and all that—up to their neck in debts. Father gambled most of it away. Relatives had some pull, and got Austin in the bank. He's one of your sporty kind. Chorus girls and the races, and bachelor apartments in town. Lot he helps the family. Don't know how they get credit. Guess the relatives help some. George Griscom's wife is Mrs. Courtney's sister, and the Griscoms could give every man in Baltimore a couple of dollars apiece and not know they had spent anything. Bess is going to make good, though."

"She's one of the most attractive kids *I* ever saw," Wrenne remarked.

"She sure is. But I wasn't thinking about her

looks. She paints, you know. Now, don't make that silly joke—I mean, of course, that she paints pictures."

"At *her* age!"

"Well, I should say so. She's been drawing ever since she was a tot. Original as the devil! Made a caricature of Jim in his first cadet uniform, four years ago, when she was twelve. I've got it framed and hung up in my room."

"You mean to tell me a twelve-year-old kid did that! Why, I thought that——"

"Oh, yes, I know. Everybody does. We all concede that Bess is a wonder. She's gone in for technique lately, and works every day at the Charcoal Club. They've got a man there who used to be with Julian, and who took some prizes at the Paris salon. He's enthusiastic about her. Bess is the girl for my money, all right. And she can ride like a clipper, too. She follows the Elkridge hounds every Saturday, and has got the nerve and pluck of any two average men."

They went below to wash up, and later one of the servants informed them their dinner was ready.

"When are you going back to the Point, Hammy?" asked Emory, when they were seated by one of the square-paned windows overlooking the snow-covered valley.

He had met Wrenne at Union Station early that afternoon, and taken him out in his sleigh before going home. Up to now they had not discussed personalities. Emory was rather surprised that Wrenne was not at the academy, for he knew the winter term was on. Wrenne was to graduate that year along with Frank's brother Jim.

"I'm not going back at all, Frank," answered Wrenn. "I was booked through for Washington, but I thought I'd drop off here and let you know about my case. I probably sha'n't see you again for years and years. I've an appointment to-morrow with the Chinese ambassador in Washington."

"With the Chinese ambassador!" Emory laid down his fork.

"Prezactly! He is to give me my appointment as a captain in the Chinese army!"

Emory stared at him, not well pleased. "Chucking the service?"

"Been chucked, Frank. Oh, it was done very quietly! The superintendent was a friend of dad's, and he allowed me to resign. They caught me playing cards after taps. It was my room—the rest skedad-dled. Lights up, and Cadet Captain Hamilton Wrenne discovered amid playing-cards, poker-chips, beer-bottles, and cigarettes. Case for courtmartial, all

right ; but the newspapers have been making so beastly much rot over hazing and other things that the court-martial was given the go-by. The superintendent asked me for the names of the other chaps. In case I peached, I was to be reduced to the ranks, lose a lot of points in grade, do 'sentry-go' for a month or so, etcetera, *and* etcetera. The others would get the same dose. In case I refused to give up, I would lose the chance of graduating."

"Well?"

Hamilton Wrenne smiled. "Good Lord, Frank!" he said, protestingly.

"Of course, old man."

Wrenne drank some coffee. "Well, it was hard lines. Dad and grandad both retired generals, and their son not allowed to graduate! Perhaps it's better they're dead. They'd have taken it pretty hard. But the superintendent was decent. He let me resign, and recommended that my resignation be accepted. Then he took me aside, and told me the Chinese were looking for military-school men to teach their soldiers to fight in our fashion. I made application and was accepted. To-morrow I see the Chinese ambassador, get my appointment and expenses, and go to Peking."

Emory stretched his hand across the table, and touched the other's fingers. "Good boy, Hammy!"

he said softly. "But it was hard lines, hard lines. You were pretty near at the top of your class, too."

"Only one man ahead of me." Wrenne sat silent for a minute, then: "Let's have a drink, Frank. I can't sign checks at this club, or I'd order one myself. Don't bother about me. I'm going to have a good time out there in China. I haven't read Kipling for nothing. Always did want to get 'somewheres east of Suez'—was going to apply for a Philippine's scouts' commission. Dare say I can climb higher in this Chinese service. I'll have a freer hand, anyhow."

They drank to one another. The dinner finished, they lingered over their cognac, coffee, and cigarettes.

"Where does Bess Courtney live?"

"Only about two blocks from here. Curious her taking in that Chinese, wasn't it, and you going out to China? Do you know what that fool kid did? She took him right into the house, and made their nigger John undress him and put him to bed. Then she sent for the doctor. Curious kid, very. Why do you ask?"

Hamilton Wrenne had taken the bit of cambric handkerchief from his pocket. He was rubbing it between his fingers.

"Like to drop over and call?"

For a moment an affirmative trembled on Wrenne's

lips, but it went away when he smiled. It was rather a sad smile, and a shake of the head accompanied it.

"I'd be afraid to, Frank. You see, I've *got* to start for China to-morrow."

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

TO PAINT THE PORTRAIT OF A PRINCE

The favor of your presence is requested on
the evening of the 18th of October at
Holmwood House:

To meet
His Imperial Highness:
Prince Chu'un.

R.S.V.P. to
Mrs. Patterson Corby.

THIS form of invitation was in the hands of every one of the slightest note in Washington society by October 1. And no one failed to send an acceptance. It was not often that even Washingtonians were able to meet the brother of an emperor; and Prince Chu'un and his imperial Chinese majesty had the same father.

The prince was distinguished in another way. He had been partly educated among white people. Patterson Corby had been his classmate at Oxford, and adjudged him as a very decent sort of chap according to any standard. It was a distinct plume in Mrs.

Corby's bonnet that she should, by virtue of this previous acquaintanceship be able to introduce the prince to the social elect of Washington; and she reduced a check-book to stubs in order that the setting should be fit for the jewel.

Patterson Corby had family, and his wife had wealth. Holmwood House was, therefore, an exceedingly desirable place to which to be invited. It was a huge pile of white masonry in the Renaissance style—stone-walled, iron-gated, with a grassy stretch surrounding it, an Italian pergola, and a toy lake. Within, it was distinguished by lofty ceilings, marble pillars, marvelous frescos, and not too much furniture. The Patterson Corbys believed in long stretches of space, in order that their priceless fittings might be properly appreciated.

Mrs. Patterson Corby received in the Chinese room. This had been one of her pet projects; and on it she had lavished much wealth, attention, and good taste. It now fitted quite excellently into the scheme of things. Its frescos might have been the wonder of Chinese artists, for they carried out the Oriental style and color effect, but were executed with the strength and originality of a brain not so old as the Chinese. The painted silk screens were from the same hand. The carved chairs, lacquered columns, swinging-

lamps, and rare rugs were only to be rivaled by those of the imperial palace itself. A subtle Oriental perfume pervaded the atmosphere.

The guests began to arrive at a little after nine, and Mrs. Corby received from a raised platform, the prince by her side, and behind him a man in the dress uniform of the Chinese Army—gorgeous yellow with gold frogging, and a crucifix-hilted sword encrusted with topazes. There were several decorations on his breast, and, as he stood bareheaded, he held in his hand a mandarin hat, with peacock plume and crystal button. They saw him to be a Caucasian.

Prince Chu'un himself was an exceedingly handsome but weak-chinned Oriental. His eyes were not oblique, nor was his nose flat. His features were as regular as a European's might have been, and only his saffron complexion marked him indubitably a Chinese. He had splendid, enthusiastic eyes, and a thin, straight, high-bridged nose.

Dressed in the imperial yellow, with a Double-Dragon interwoven throughout in gold threads, his gown belted about the waist by a golden-linked belt, clasped with a carven topaz, he was a singularly stately figure. He held his hat in his hand, in deference to the European custom, as he smiled upon each briefly presented one, turning afterward with a graceful

sweep of the body to the uniformed man behind him:

"My aide-de-camp, Colonel Wrenne."

And the guests, mixing with one another, and generally failing to catch the name, asked one another who that striking-looking, black-visaged man might be.

"His aide-de-camp, Colonel Somebody."

"But he's not a Chinese."

"Who said he was? They have white officers in the Chinese Army." This from the former consul to Shanghai.

"Do you know him?"

But the consul was out of ear-shot.

"His name's Wrenne," volunteered the daughter of a cabinet official. "He called on father the other day."

"Wrenne? Well, upon my soul, if it isn't old Hammy Wrenne!" An army lieutenant speaking this time.

"Do you know him?"

"Rath-er! My cadet captain. Resigned five years ago. Sad story, very. Never mind that. Heard he went out to China and quite distinguished himself. Must have a word with old Hammy."

He took himself off.

But it was not particularly easy to have word with

Colonel Hamilton Wrenne about that time. The formal presentation of the guests over, the prince and his body-guard had been surrounded by half a score of gushing débutantes and earnest, purposeful ladies interested in Chinese foreign missions. The prince, who spoke very good English, was trying to answer the purposeful ladies, while Wrenne managed to keep the débutantes at bay.

In fact, it was a toss-up as to which one of the two was really the most interesting. This Colonel Wrenne, with his clear, swarthy skin, his intensely black hair and bold eyes, his tightly fitting uniform and shining boots bringing out every line of his slim, powerful form, was decidedly out of the ordinary. An American, young, the confidant of the prince. There was a smack of the mysterious about him to which his careless air and clear-cut features gave an entrancing touch of the debonair. He was ready with his tongue, too; had many pleasant gallantries and an effective manner of rendition, so that for the moment the recipient of the flattery imagined that he might have implied more than he said.

He was growing decidedly tired of it, however, and welcomed the news that the grand opera tenor had arrived. He sought the prince, and the crowd followed them to the music-room, those who could not

get in making the best of it in the conservatories outside.

It was then that the prince managed to speak privately for a moment with his aide-de-camp.

"You saw that marvelous artistry, Black Wrenne? You saw the clouds and the rice-fields and the dragons? You saw the Buddha face? Eh, my Wrenne?"

"You mean the decorations of the room where you were received?"

"No other, my Wrenne. Wonder that we have not the artist at the palace. Chinese he surely is; but in China we have no such artist. What do you think, my Black Wrenne—eh?"

"It's good work," the aide-de-camp responded. "I'll ask this Corby woman the name of the artist when De Kurtz finishes."

The tenor was vociferously applauded. He put one hand on his little fat stomach, bowed so that the lights shone on the pomaded remnants of his hair, and strutted off.

"If he could only sing from behind a screen!" sighed a female voice near Wrenne. He turned, and caught a glimpse of hair like burnished copper, with two little curls loose at the neck. He would have

followed, for some vague recognition had come to his mind. The prince's hand on his arm detained him.

"The turkey-cock will again crow!" said the prince.

De Kurtz was back by the piano for his encore. He had a marvelous voice; and the proof of it lay in the fact that, when he had bowed, many took deep breaths. Mrs. Patterson Corby herself had forgotten the prince for the minute. Now she was by his side again, but the wife of the British ambassador had claimed his attention, and she was left to speak to Hamilton Wrenne. She said something unimportant about De Kurtz's singing, to which he replied in kind, then:

"Mrs. Corby, the prince admires your decorations in the Chinese room."

She smiled brilliantly.

"Does he? I'm terribly glad. I think they're simply perfect. He must meet the artist. She's here to-night."

"She?"

"Yes. Isn't it odd? A girl did them. And——"

"American?"

"Yes. She's a sort of relative of mine. That is, George Griscom's wife is her aunt. And George is a cousin of mine. Her family's awfully hard up. Nice people, though, very! Baltimoreans. You might

know them. The—— Oh, there she is. Come along, Colonel Wrenne.”

He followed her as she threaded her way through couples and groups straight to where a girl in a white lace gown was talking to a lean, bronzed Englishman and a thin Japanese. Both had the broad, red ribbon of the Diplomatic Corps across their shirt-fronts; and both wore a multiplicity of glittering orders pinned to the lapels of their dress coats.

“Miss Courtney, let me present Colonel Wrenne. Bess, this is Prince Chu’un’s friend. They’ve been admiring your work tremendously.”

Remembering her duty as a hostess, Mrs. Corby then went elsewhere.

“Do you know Captain Abercrombie—and Count Ito Ugichi, Colonel Wrenne?”

He bowed to the Englishman and nodded to the Japanese. “Oh, I know the count,” he said. His tone did not imply that he knew anything favorable about him. “How d’ye do, captain? Think we had you up at Shan-hai-kuan once, didn’t we? I was sorry I wasn’t there. Parker spoke of you.”

“Oh, quite right. To be sure. Hamilton Wrenne, eh? Yes, to be sure. So you’re old Yuan-shi-Kai’s pet—what? The man who put down the rebellion in Cheh-li? I say, come to the club after this is over,

won't you? Army and Navy—yes! You've a card, of course. I'd like to talk over China-way with you. *Chin-chin.*"

This with the smile of those who have a common interest in the Orient. He bowed to Miss Courtney, and went off.

"The prince is looking for you, Ugichi," said Wrenne.

The Japanese did not look very well pleased, but his meaningless smile submerged his expression. With him gone, Wrenne took the girl's arm and led her into the chrysanthemum section of the conservatory, where great balls of yellow, white, and pink nodded at them. He seated her, and remained standing, looking down at her wealth of hair, little curls of which clung about her neck, ears and forehead.

She had lost the thinness of her childhood. From her rosy rounded shoulders to her delicately arched ankles she was of an exquisite slimness. But the eyes were the same—that old red-brown, almost comparable to the darkest of rubies, with slumbering fires in their depths. They matched the odd olive coloring of her skin, which nevertheless had nothing un-Anglo-Saxon about it; nothing of the Latin or even the Gaul. Her coloring might have been that of Long Will Langland's "Nut-Browne Mayde."

"Still 'Brown Bess.' " It was this that caused him to speak his thoughts aloud.

It was the first thing he had said, although he had been looking at her for some time. She had returned his gaze frankly.

"Do you know I was going to quote Tweedledum to you: 'If you think we're wax images, you ought to pay; if you think we're human——' "

"Well, you don't look like *most* humans," was the clumsy best he could do.

"Hamilton Wrenne, royal favorite of women!" she smiled.

He added hastily, blushing as he told her:

"I've remembered you for five years."

"Perhaps you have a mind for detail," she suggested sweetly. "Most military people have. In what train of well-ordered thought was I a detail."

"Not a detail at all—the radiating center."

"Bravo! On the left we have the radiating lady."

"Seriously, Miss Courtney—Brown Bess—you don't remember me, eh?"

"I have a vague recollection of your intense blackness of hair and eyes. I can't conceive forgetting those. I'm a painter, you see."

"You take away with your left what you give with your right. However, my vanity isn't hurt. You only

saw me for a minute—maybe less. It was five years ago. The Club Road at Roland Park. Some boys throwing stones at a Chinese!”

“You——”

“No, I wasn’t one of the boys throwing stones. You flatter my youth, Brown Bess. I was the man you peremptorily ordered out of the sleigh.”

“You——”

“Yes. I’d just been sacked from West Point, and had accepted an appointment in the Chinese Army! The next day I saw the Chinese ambassador, and before night I was on my way to San Francisco to take the P. M. boat for Shanghai.”

“Frank Emory’s friend!”

“Yes. I must look up Frank, by the bye. I suppose he——”

“He’s in his father’s office. A lawyer. All the Emorys take to the law when they don’t go into the army. They are a family with traditions.”

“Yes, to be sure. Well, you can see now how I’ve remembered you. It was the turning-point in my life.”

“I told you I was only a detail.” She laughed.

“Let’s be serious,” pleaded Wrenne.

“Gayety doesn’t come often enough to fling it away carelesslike. We can be serious enough without try-

ing. However, have it your own way. That was the turning-point in my life, too. And also due to Chinese influence. There's a bond of futurity between us, Colonel Wrenne."

"How a turning-point in your life?"

"You remember the Chinese I took home? He was the influence. It so happened that he was a Chinese gentleman—and an artist in his way. I nursed him through an attack of brain fever, and he took some sort of a fancy to me. Mother was furious, but—well, she gave in. We had a little out-house on the grounds, and he went there to live. He paid us for it by taking care of our garden. Thanks to him, we have the most magnificent garden anywhere about Baltimore. He could do the queerest things with flowers. He added to it, and finally built a hothouse. The family's awfully glad he's with us now—there's a big demand for his flowers. He's quite the fashionable florist. And we get the money! Nice, isn't it?"

"Very. But his influence on you?"

"He taught me the Chinese color scheme and distance effect. Also the *grotesquerie*. My own instincts supply the realism of face and figure. Occidental technique added to Oriental imagery! It's something quite new."

"You've done wonderful work. This Chinese of yours must be a treasure."

"He is. It's odd, isn't it?"

"Everything connected with the Chinese is odd—to us. We can't get their view-point. The Chinese soul is old; very old. It's been satiated with all the emotions. We are distressingly new and interested. I'd like to see your Chinese treasure."

"You can't. He won't have anything to do with other Chinese, nor with anyone who's been in China. I've tried that before. There's some sort of a mystery there."

"Everything Chinese is mysterious—to us. But, Miss Courtney, I want you to meet the prince."

"I shook hands with both him and you. You don't seem to remember that!"

"I must have been saying something to the last person I shook hands with. Will you come?"

She nodded. They left the conservatory. The prince was not in the Chinese room, the music-room, nor the Louis XIV. reception-room. They ran him to earth under a hexagonal lantern in the Flemish cell.

Miss Courtney was briefly presented as "the artist the Imperial one had deigned to notice." Wrenne used the florid form satirically.

"He mocks our customs in his English, this Black

Wrenne," smiled the prince. "You know our art, it would seem, Miss Courtney. I had imagined the artist one of my countrymen. A new touch! You preserve our conventions and atmosphere, and add realism. I am very charmed with your work, Miss Courtney."

She thanked him.

"You paint the face—pardon!—the portrait?"

"I have done both face and figure from Chinese models. But it was generally symbolical."

"I have a reason for asking, Miss Courtney. My portrait has never been painted. My aunt, the queen-mother, has had her portrait done by an American; a Miss Karl. She is pleased with it. She has also set a precedent. I may now follow her example."

"You mean——"

She had lost her self-control. She was almost gasping.

"I mean I shall be in Washington for some little time, and I should like you to paint my portrait, Miss Courtney."

CHAPTER II

THE SLEEPING SERPENT WITH THE STRANGLING TAIL

THE half-light of a drizzling afternoon did little to light up a private cabinet in the Japanese legation where two men sat with the passive calm of the Oriental belying their inward tumult. One was Count Ito Ugichi, special envoy of the mikado to where he willed; the other, whom his countrymen called "Gray Fox"—keen, resourceful, unscrupulous; most dangerous for his original brain. He was in a heavy silk kimono, this Gray Fox; his feet slipped—the count frock-coated, gray-trousered, nursing a walking-stick with gloved hands. Matters of moment had been discussed, plans made, details discussed. They lingered over personalities, speaking in their own language.

"To us, already in debt many hundred million yen, this is no light matter, Ito-san. Our country groans under new taxation, our customs are mortgaged to the English, our internal revenue to the Americans. We have little money, Ito-san."

"It is to be that we have much when this end is consummated. The treasuries of China—think you, grave one! The stones groan in the Temple of the Son of Heaven; groan under much weight of gold. The darkness alone greets the seven thousand eyes of Buddha. The door of the Double-Dragon is closed. Think you—what wealth, son of the Samurai——"

The other's beady eyes shone greedily out of their red rims.

"Think, too, of Taotais and viceroys to be sweated out of ill-gotten gains; of lamas with treasure hid in their monasteries. Kwannon and Shaka shall take for their own the treasure of these heretical Shintos. And Nippon shall play *nakodo*." *

He grinned. But so long had he made this grin meaningless, that when he would have had it significant, he failed. Too long had he worn the mask for mobility to visit his countenance.

"Think!"

The other man combed his thin point of gray beard with talonlike fingers. His smile was a purely speculative one.

"Almost am I convinced, Ito-san. You make honorable promises!"

Ito Ugichi made a wry face. "Too long have I

* Middle man.

listened to these Western barbarians," he said. "They have another word for what we would do. 'Honorable' to them—that is different!"

"The Ugichi hath no fear of the future?" Gray Fox smiled.

"There are eels that sting as serpents. There are serpents that much resemble eels. I know these Westerners better than the esteemed father's son! At times I have fear of them. Then I say: What chance have they? We, the subtle, the wise of many generations, may outgeneral them at every point. Yet there is a subtlety of eternal innocence; a well-spring fit for drowning in the clear truth. Fuji! there is a certain muddiness in my metaphors which the well-spring might do well in lacking. You grasp me, Gray Fox?"

Quite inscrutable the other, with his wisely smiling face. His benevolent hypocrisy was as much a mask as Ito's meaningless grin.

"Fear!" He stroked the beard-point thoughtfully. "We do not fear what we understand, Ugichi. Had these Westerners remained always innocent they might be more dangerous. Perforce now they add the semblance of cunning which only old races may have. In believing their acuteness, they are delivered into the hand of Nippon. A holy innocent may not easily be gulled. A man wise in his own egotism is but the prey

of the truly wise. Kwannon preserve thy intellect among these muddled metaphysics! The deed for the word, good Ugichi!"

Ugichi fondled the cane. "I fear them sometimes—not often. As a nation, never, but individuals—a difference there, gnawing Gray Fox! It is no fault of these Americans that, as a country, they are stupid. The fault is otherwise." He paused. "They have the wrong men at the head of things."

Gray Fox looked triumphant. "My theory, good Ugichi, but rehashed! Spake I not so in Yeddo, several years ago? We had gulled this American nation. As we fought with Russia they cheered and encouraged us; sent for our hospitals money; for our famine sufferers, food."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"They were pleased to patronize *us*, O good Ugichi! We of Nippon! Our good friends they! 'The poor little Jap,' said they——" He quoted in English, mimicking: "'The poor little Jap fighting the great bearded Russian.' They are one great gallery, these Americans. Of us they made a hero!"

Both took to laughing now, their glee unrepressed.

"We told them how we loved them! Ah, we loved them nobly, good Ugichi! Nobly! Ha! 'We imitate you,' said we. 'Teach us to be like you. We would sit

at the master's feet and learn. We would be the Yankees of the East.' Barbarian fools! That they might teach us aught!"

Into his eyes came a sadness.

"And yet—I would it were not so, Ugichi. My thrice-honored and divinely deceased father—he of the Daimio—he told me much of the old days. A happy people we. Happy in our own islands, with none but our own people, believing most devoutly in our gods, tilling the land; happy—aye, Ugichi, happy. To us had been preached contentment; the pursuit of naught save the spiritual weal; the content of the cot and the palace. Long ago that, my Ugichi."

He lost the mask and was suddenly quite fierce.

"What cared we for these foreigners with their new machinery, their lights of electricity, their hideous clothes, their false modesty, their guns, and their belching ships! We were happy—happy, my Ugichi."

There was a wail in his voice.

"Long we resisted them—forbade them entrance to our shores; forbade that they bring to us knowledge of what we did not need, which, knowing, we might desire and strive for. But their all-conquering greed for money drove them on. They forced themselves upon us with roaring sea-monsters of steel and iron;

with iron tubes that sent death-hail among us—and then!”

Ugichi clasped his stick firmly, a sudden gleam in his eyes.

“Then the sleeping serpent opened his eyes. The guileful serpent of Nippon! They had trodden upon his tail, and his eyes blinked upon them. He saw their strength, their superior cunning of instruments. A wise serpent! What then?”

“‘By their own standards they set everything, these barbarians.’ So the serpent! ‘Long have I pondered over the things of the beyond. That I may further dream, let me preserve my peace by besting them in the things of the world. My lack of mechanics is lack of inclination. As brain to brain—you are fledglings; Western materialists.’

“And so he set himself to learn. And now—now the canker has spread—grown. No longer does he desire contentment. A materialist he—he grasps, this serpent. He would wrap the world in his tail and strangle it. For he hath a very strong, supple tail, O Ugichi.”

Gray Fox fell back, exhausted. He coughed. Ugichi patted his back.

“Yes,” he said, with a certain ferocity, “they brought it upon themselves, these barbarians. They

awakened the serpent. He cannot sleep again—not again. He must own all or be scotched—this great serpent of ours. For our contentment is gone; no longer do we believe in our gods; no longer care for aught save conquest——”

Both lost the sadness of eyes—became expressionless again. Gray Fox spoke brusquely.

“And when we have put Prince Chu’un on the throne of China; made him the thirteenth emperor; removed Kwang-Hsu of the ‘Great Purity,’ and his aunt, ‘She of the Western Palace’; when Japanese rifles in the hands of Chinese rebels make echoes through the red-walled city—do we not chance aught? Eh, there, my Ugichi? How then of Chu’un? Fine promises are the prerogative of princes of the succession. How then?”

“With a Nipponese army within the gates? A question unworthy of Gray Fox. Of Prince Chu’un fear nothing. Upon me he leans entirely in this matter. He would be emperor. Tze-Hsi would have Tuan, the third brother of Kwang-Su, the future son of heaven—and Tze-Hsi rules China. Well are her palace doors marked ‘*Sho.*’ * She would live forever, this barren, sharp-toothed she-wolf. And succession for Chu’un comes not while Tze-Hsi lives.

* Longevity.

China sweats under oppression and the inroads of the foreigners. They curse the emperor secretly as a babe in the hands of the unbeloved dowager. We of Nippon have given them strength and belief in the yellow man. Before they had thought the white race invincible. Now with the White Bear fleeing to his Siberian steppes—the Great Fear is gone. Chu'un, with Nippon at his back, would be hailed with '*Banzais*'—but of this discussion what use? Fate has willed. It is the Emperor's desire——"

They bowed their heads. Feudality is no dead thing with the Japanese. They had spoken of their ruler.

Ugichi picked up his silk hat, smoothed the nap, and prepared himself to go. "There is but one obstacle; one whom I fear. Not that he will not aid in the plot, for it is to his interest that Chu'un be emperor; for of him Chu'un hath made a companion, a sharer of secrets, an adviser in military law, and other affairs. Black-visaged this fellow, and secret in his ways. Some frowning storm-god of Fuji might have fashioned his face."

"The American aide-de-camp?"

"He is the man."

"And you fear him?"

"Because of his great secretiveness. He holds his tongue well, the Black Wrenne. Of monumental aid

to me in my share in the details, for he hath a cunning mind and a great understanding of men. Of conscience—little. No hypocrite, in verity, but his strength and reserve make me fear him. It would appear that he deems a certain amount of subtlety enough for the gaze of others than himself, chuckling meanwhile that they believe it his all. But of him I have no present fear; only later when Chu'un be emperor—— Now he is quite occupied——”

“Another scheme?”

“The painter of portraits. The Spirit of the Cherry-Blossoms—she of pink cheeks and ruddy hair. She paints the portrait of the prince, but her eyes are for Black Wrenne. And when a woman engrosseth a man, plots and counterplots find him not too eager for them.”

He flourished his hat. Gray Fox arose and put his talonlike hands on the other's shoulders. His rodent-like eyes searched those of his subordinate.

“I have heard tales of the woman with the ruddy hair. Kwannon hath many eyes. It is said that the Count Ito Ugichi is seen often to enter the house where she paints.”

Ugichi dropped his gaze. The talons tightened on his shoulders.

“Remember, it is as you have said: ‘When a woman

engrosseth a man, plots and counterplots find him not too eager for them.' Be careful! An infatuation with a Western woman is death, Ugichi. We cannot understand them, we of the Orient. There have been among us men who have striven for them. When we desire our own women, we buy them of their parents in proper, discreet fashion. With them is no perturbation of mind; only pandering to our bodily cravings. These Western women have a fashion of setting brain alight, of destroying subtlety, of making of man abject mental slaves, while the craze lasts—so beware, Ugichi!"

The count met his gaze, but quickly withdrew his eyes. "To me—why this——" He was not speaking confidently. From this keen Gray Fox even the mind seemed an unsafe place to hide passions unauthorized.

"Remember—you belong to the Son of Heaven. Forgetting, you may achieve no merit for Ito Ugichi."

CHAPTER III

BLACK WRENNE BOWS TO BROWN BESS

PRINCE CHU'UN'S portrait was finished. Bess stood off and observed it with critical eye. It was not as good as she expected to do five years hence; but the best that her present power could compass.

It stood, propped against the chair on the model's platform in her Washington studio, which overlooked Lafayette Park. Through the bay windows of the old mansion one caught a glimpse of the White House across the way, and the façade of the State, War, and Navy Building. The house had once been occupied by a prominent Washington family; afterward it had been the abode of successive cabinet ministers. When the tide of fashion swept up Connecticut Avenue way, the lower floor had been let as offices for a branch of the Federal judiciary, while the upper floors had been converted into studios. Bess had the spacious attic, which had once been the family store-room. It possessed the facilities of a good north light, and a

splendid view. There were stairs to climb, but that was nothing to a young, healthy woman like Bess.

She addressed the Chinese who stood gazing at her work—the same Chinese who, five years before, had been taken to her home in Frank Emery's sleigh. At first sight he might have been mistaken for a Japanese—cue gone, hair clipped close to his head, wearing a lounge-suit of brown tweeds. He had deliberately sacrificed the cue—by his action tacitly acknowledging that he did not intend to return to his native land.

“Well, Lee, what do you think of it?”

It was his first sight of the picture. He had come over from Baltimore only that day to see his pupil's work before its delivery to the Chinese prince. Bess had told him much concerning the portrait, going to and fro between Baltimore and Washington almost every day.

He answered slowly and in excellent English:

“The hand—here——!” He pointed. “There is too much of it—it attracts the eye from the face by being so conspicuous. You have put into the hand much character—the character of the man—and to it first people will look. This fold of the inner robe is in too sharp a contrast to the curve of the angle——”

He shrugged his shoulders, and, reaching over, re-draped the picture.

"Well?" Bess had disappointment in her tone.

He came to her, smiling softly, and took both her hands in his.

"It is because I fear to make you satisfied that I am lacking in praise, plum-blossom!"

"Then it is good—oh, *Lee!*"

"It is good, little flower of my heart. But better things you shall yet do. Save the two defects I have mentioned, there are no faults to find. And now I go back!"

He picked up his brown bowler hat and gloves.

"I have no wish to meet the brother of the Son of Heaven. Nor his American soldier. All things Chinese I have left behind me, plum-blossom. I would not be reminded."

They shook hands.

"*Lee!*"—with sudden alarm—"you are not looking well. You have been working too hard, *Lee*. You are not well."

He smiled. "No? You have noticed it?"

He had the head of a Confucius, the puny body of a lama. There was much to distinguish him in feature—the lofty forehead, bulging outward: the high cheek-bones; the face curving to a point. His eyes were those of the thinker, dreamer, and deep hater. The face was thin and very much wrinkled, its yellow skin

drawn tightly over little flesh. There were black rings about his eyes; a certain flaccidity of the lips.

"Let me tell you, plum-blossom, I am as well as I may hope. It is the heart." He put his hand to his side. "I had not expected to live as long as I have, little flower of my heart. For years I have been expecting the messenger of the goal. But——"

"Lee!" She shook him sharply. There was moisture in her eyes. "Lee, don't talk like that!"

His face warmed. "You care, little one? You have always cared—for poor Lee. But it is best to be prepared. At any moment it may come—click! And then to the graves of my ancestors—the last of my line! It is true, plum-blossom."

He bowed, sweeping his hat close to the floor. "The gods guide you!" Then he was gone.

The girl went to the window and watched him as he emerged from the house and struck through Lafayette Park on his way to the Pennsylvania cars. He walked feebly, a bent-over, shrunken little figure, and she wiped away tears from her eyes as she watched him. She owed much to this Chinese—her philosophy, her training in Oriental art, her broad outlook on life. Then, too, he had recruited the family finances in his inconspicuous way, making of their gardens a revenue. She sank down into the window-seat.

"Poor old Lee!"

That was what he had chosen to be called—"Lee." She knew that was but the English equivalent of "Li," and but one of three names. When necessity had compelled another name, he chose that of "Gordon."

"He was a great general, that Gordon," Lee had said. "I have seen what he did with our soldiers."

Gordon Lee! And that was all she knew of her Chinese mentor. She arose, went to her portfolio, and took out a recent sketch of "Gordon Lee." She had taken the face and pose from an unconscious sitting, when he imagined her engaged on another picture, but had provided the cue, the mandarin's coat and hat, and the fan from her own imagination. Thus she imagined Lee must have looked in his native country. She pondered over it, thinking of improvements, her red lips pursed up, her pretty brows in a frown, her head bent over, so that the sunbeams made an aureole of her hair. One pink finger was pointing accusingly at certain technical defects.

Quite suddenly two strong hands on her shoulders, turned her completely around, to look into the eyes of Hamilton Wrenne. She surveyed him with outward coolness. His top hat and stick had clattered to the floor as he seized her, and she noted that his morning

coat was smartly cut, his white silk Ascot well tied, a flawless ruby in Chinese gold holding it together.

"Well, Black Wrenne?"

"Well, Brown Bess?"

"It is my right to ask the question," she informed him. "You enter my studio without knocking; you take me rudely by the shoulders——"

"Not rudely—tenderly!"

"If that is tenderness, I shouldn't like to feel your savage mood. However, to proceed. You hold me in a grip which will leave two red marks on my shoulders that will show when I attend the Mason-Carrs' dinner to-night."

He released her. She rubbed her shoulders with solicitude.

"Thank you. And then you have the presumption to say 'Well'?"

"The door was wide open. You made a prettier picture than you have ever painted."

"Thanks for the subtle appreciation of my work!"

"Hang it! you know what I mean."

"I thought I did. When you took me by the shoulders I imagined you were going to kiss me."

He took a step backward.

"Well, so I did intend!" he said, goaded.

"I hate a man who merely threatens——"

He came toward her, but she eluded him.

"Hang it, Bess! you're the most tantalizing creature alive."

"Why? Because I refuse to be the plaything of Hamilton Wrenne, Colonel, I. C. A. and aide-de-camp to his Imperial Highness, Prince Chu'un; Mandarin of the second degree, and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society; not to mention Don Juan in general to any foolish girl who fancies his sinister type of beauty? Hardly so, Black Wrenne!"

With a sudden rush forward, he had her penned in a corner.

"Now," he said triumphantly, "we shall see, Brown Bess!"

She held up a rosy finger. "I fancy not, Black Wrenne. Listen! We are quite alone in this studio. If I called out, no one would hear me. You are quite safe. You can kiss me as much as you please. But you're taking no chances, Black Wrenne. The game is one-sided. And you're not the sort of man to play that game, are you, Black Wrenne!"

He threw up his hands despairingly.

"Upon my word, Bess, I'm no match for you. I surrender, capitulate, and kiss the chains that embrace me. Please will you give the captive of your wheels some tea?"

She crossed the room, turned on the alcohol-lamp, and mixed the tea and hot water.

"Why aren't you like other girls, Brown Bess?" asked Wrenne, as he accepted the cup from her hands and watched the slice of lemon circle the rim.

"You mean why don't I show the proper thankfulness for your condescension, and be your doll 'for a week or a month or a day, sir'? Is that it?"

"You make me out a fearfully egotistical ass!"

"No. Simply call your attention to the fact, Hamilton, dear." She smiled at him captivately.

"Now, upon my word!" he said, in indignation. "You call me 'dear,' give me a smile that, luckily, came several centuries too late for St. Anthony, and then pulverize me when I lose control of myself."

"I'm penancing you for the sake of the other women. But I expect you're not wholly to blame, Black Wrenne. You've found your sinister beauty a good bait for girls who want the excuse of physical attraction. You believe that most of us only want that excuse. I believe you're right. You most certainly *are* in my case."

"What!" He nearly dropped his cup.

"Most certainly!" she repeated. "You have a very vivid attraction for me. I've often rather wanted you to kiss me. I feel sure I should like it——"

He put his cup on the tray and stared at her.

"——that's my animal, physical self," she continued placidly. "That is just Bess Courtney; Brown Bess, who enjoys physical sensations. But, you see, I'm a painter, Black Wrenne. That's not Bess Courtney. That's a part of the universal soul of things given into my keeping; a precious gem that I must keep flawless. The setting must be worthy of the gem—Therefore, Black Wrenne, my self-respect. Rather involved, isn't it?"

He got up, came over, and took her hand.

"Bess," he said, "you're a damn' good sort!"

Crossing the room, he removed the drapery from the picture of the prince. For some time he gazed on it, giving her the flattery of statuelike attention. It was with a deep intake of breath that he turned to her.

"You've opened my eyes, rather, my dear girl. It is indeed presumption that Hamilton Wrenne, a mere foreign mercenary, good for mighty little but a plot or a fight, should seek to make a conquest of the girl that painted—that!"

"Thank you," she said simply. His praise was too genuine to call forth a display of false modesty.

"By the bye," he said presently, when the consciousness of having betrayed emotion had passed off, "they tell me Ito Ugichi is a frequent visitor here. Not that

they need to tell me—I've seen him here often enough myself."

"He comes quite often," she acknowledged. "He interests me. He is the best liar I have ever known."

"Oh!" He laughed with a certain constraint. "You take the words on my tongue. I'm flattered to think there's a certain telepathy between us. Ugichi insults you with his admiration. You know the Japanese idea of women."

"Is there really much difference between his admiration of me and yours, Black Wrenne?" she asked softly.

The sudden stricture left him flushing with its truth.

"No," she said, "there isn't. Only a difference between the men. Ugichi is yellow, not prepossessing. Hamilton Wrenne is white, and striking—rather! But both admire me in the same way. Is it the better part of me, the part that finds expression in my work, that you admire? My ideals? My striving for better things? No, Black Wrenne. Only these brown curls; the curves of my figure, the redness of my lips! There lies the admiration. And both of you are unmoral—not immoral, for I know *he* never had any morals, and I doubt whether you ever had. But, still, there is a difference between you——"

She paused. Wrenne, shamefaced, did not meet her gaze.

"I am afraid of Ugichi. I am *not* afraid of you!"

"Why?" he asked, in a low tone.

"You, being an Anglo-Saxon, have honor—he, being a Japanese, has not even that!"

CHAPTER IV

HE OF THE WHITE BANNER

“**T**HIS man!”

There was an unusual note in the voice of Prince Chu'un. He held in his hand the sketch of the Chinese who chose to call himself “Gordon Lee.”

It was an hour later. Prince Chu'un had seen the finished portrait and had approved of it without reservation. The secretary of the Chinese legation had presented in payment a check for more than twice the sum for which she would have dared ask. There was also his highness' gift—a belt of topazes, with a jade buckle, beyond price. Bess Courtney was somewhat dazed.

She would have returned the splendid present, but Hamilton Wrenne, surmising her intention, warned her that that way lay imperial displeasure. It was, he assured her, the privilege of royalty to make such gifts as were compatible with their pleasure. Bess, only wanting an excuse to retain the belt, reconsidered.

The legation servants had been brought to the studio for the weighty ceremony that took place, and the official members of the legation stood solemnly by in official robes. The portrait had been placed in a camphor-wood box, lined with the imperial yellow. This box was inclosed in others similarly lined. The boxes were covered with yellow cloth, painted with the Double-Dragon; and, at last, the picture was ready for transmission to Peking, to be viewed by the august eyes of Kwang-Hsu, thirteenth of the great purity emperors, and brother of Prince Chu'un.

A private car had been reserved to convey the portrait to San Francisco, in charge of a gentleman of the legation and two attendants. From thence an O. and O. S. S. stateroom would have the honor of its presence to Shanghai, a C. N. C. stateroom to Tien-tsin, and a very special train from that point to Peking, where a cavalcade would receive it and convey it within the environs of the Forbidden City.

But the part Bess bore in the ceremony was over. Those of the Chinese legation had departed. Remained only the prince himself, Hamilton Wrenne, Ito Ugichi, and Bess Courtney's brother Austin, a handsome, dissipated young man, immaculately garbed, with hair too well-groomed, and an inherent weakness and sensuality of mouth and chin.

They had been startled by the sudden exclamation of the prince.

"What man?" asked Bess. She came forward and noted the sketch of her Chinese mentor upon which the prince gazed. His face was bland and placid again, but Bess knew instinctively that it had not been so when the pictured likeness first came under his eye.

She hesitated before replying, remembering Gordon Lee's avoidance of his own people, his refusal to meet even those white men who had been in China long enough to realize how little of it they understood. A chill struck her. She was at fault. She should not have exposed the sketch. She recalled that she had been looking at it when Hamilton Wrenne had pinioned her shoulders on his first entrance some hours before.

"That man!" she said, her self-control regained, her voice without emotion. "Why, he was a model that I used to have. He's dead now—these two years——"

Austin Courtney opened his mouth.

"Why, Bess!" he began. "You——"

Her look silenced him. Ito Ugichi, observing the byplay, grinned in his meaningless way, and rubbed his yellow hands together. It was with a certain chill Bess noted that the interchange of looks had been

observed by the Japanese. Prince Chu'un, however, did not seem to note the interruption.

"You remember," finished Austin, "that we had to pay for his funeral. Out in Loudon Park Cemetery. You liked him."

She smiled at the idea of Austin paying for anything—also grimly noted his facile mendacity, which had in it the colorature of little things, giving verisimilitude. The prince was apparently convinced.

"Do you know him, Your Highness?" asked the girl.

Chu'un nodded. "He was master of ceremonies at the court during my uncle's time," he said. "One of the White Banner families, having rank almost as high as my own—which is the Yellow Banner. He was fond of me, I remember; gave me much of my early Confucianisms. A wise man, and in advance of his time, perhaps. Li-Wung-Kih his name. With my august uncle's death, and the reigning of his son, the Emperor Tung, he exercised much authority, and was unfortunate enough to incur the enmity of my thrice-beloved aunt, Tze-Hsi, the queen-mother. He was accused of witchcraft; of having caused the death of the youthful Emperor Tung, and had a narrow lease of life for a space. Then he escaped, none knew whither. But this none forgot—he had been, beside

master of ceremonies, master also of the imperial treasures. After his arrest, imprisonment, and flight, his palace was searched for the treasure keys. All were found, and in good order—save one set!—the keys to the temple of the Double-Dragon, where the seven thousand eyes of Buddha look only upon the darkness to this day.”

“But other keys can——” interrupted Austin Courtney.

“No, young brother of the painter. There is one set of keys to the doors of the Double-Dragon—one set of keys which may let the light shine upon the seven thousand eyes of Buddha. In my country there is tradition, young brother of the painter. There is a tradition that these keys were fashioned at the behest of the invisible deity, and given to the Son of Heaven that he might prove his superiority over mere desire for mastership of the world. For within the temple of the Double-Dragon there is wealth untold—seven thousand diamonds of the purest stones; two thousand that are blue, two thousand that are yellow, three thousand that are white, and each the size of a pigeon’s egg.”

His audience gasped. The prince smiled.

“Ha! Your wealthy men appear but ciphers before such astounding value of gems! Perhaps it is better

that the keys be lost. Li-Wung-Kih has gone to his ancestors, say you, fair young painter? With his body let the memory of this wealth be buried. Until barbarians——”

He smiled, apologizing.

“I had forgotten. Until foreigners take the Forbidden City wholly for their own, the seven thousand eyes of Buddha are safe behind the door of the Double-Dragon!”

He put the portrait back on the table.

“Come, let us go,” he said to Hamilton Wrenne.

CHAPTER V

THE SEVEN THOUSAND EYES OF BUDDHA

BESS did not return to Baltimore that night along with Austin. She had a dinner engagement with the Mason-Carrs, and was to be one of a box-party afterward. For these contingencies she was provided, as there was a tiny room back of her studio that she occupied on such nights. The box-party, having been a wedge between the dinner and the Bachelors' Cotillion at the Willard, it was something close to four o'clock before she retired, and very near to noon before she arose. Several calls and talks regarding mural decorations which people wanted of her occupied the afternoon, and did not leave her free to go to Baltimore until dusk. She took a Roland Park car from Union Station, and arrived at home as Austin was fidgeting over his dinner, quite alone.

The mother, being an invalid, occupied her rooms constantly, and had not been below-stairs for nearly a year, except to be carried out to the family victoria and driven about the park. Some asserted her more hypo-

chondriacal than ill, indicating her stoutness and pasty complexion as evidences of one whose chief trouble is a sedentary life indoors. But Bess had accepted her mother's valuation of her ailment, and did not argue the question.

Going up-stairs, she submitted to a family lecture on the subject of girls who stayed alone in single rooms and disregarded chaperons, which was supplemented by a request for the check which Bess had received for the portrait. The request was denied very gently.

"I owe most of it, mother. I've got to pay my own bills, you know. Besides, if I give it to you, you'll simply have some new-faddish doctor in to call your trouble by some new name."

The mother wept, and spoke of the difference between the respect shown *her* and the respect she had shown *her* mother.

"And," continued Bess, "what the doctor didn't get would be borrowed by Austin. No, mother, I've got most of the burden of the house on my shoulders as it is. I'm not going to be the victim of Austin's latest fancy in chorus-girls."

Bess discussed Austin quite frankly. She had no respect for him, looking on him rather as a wayward child to be disciplined. Her mother's infatuation for the brother, however, ran to an antithetical extreme.

She was willing to deny herself little luxuries to give the money to Austin.

Bess escaped from the parental displeasure, and went to the children's play-room, where her two little sisters were studying their next day's lessons. The children went to convent school, and Bess paid the bills; also she kept them supplied with clothes and a nursery governess. Otherwise they might have grown up little savages. Their mother hardly saw them one day out of the seven.

She had a box of candy for them, which, delivered, was paid for with many hugs and kisses. Later she rejoined Austin in the dining-room. He had finished his dinner, and was scowling over a cigarette. Bess was rather surprised to see him dining home, as he seldom favored the house with his presence, sleeping at his bachelor apartments in the Savoy, and dining either with men at the clubs, women in private dining-rooms, or as a member of some formal party of people whose names were in the social register.

"You took long enough coming," he snarled. "Didn't you get my wire?"

"No."

The servant brought her some soup and went out.

"Oh, you didn't? Well, why don't you stay in your studio without gadding all over town?"

"Drop it, Austin," she commanded. "What's the matter? More debts? Because I sha'n't pay them, you know. The last money I loaned you went to buy a diamond sunburst for a certain Miss Lola Montmorancy—and—well, if my money's going for diamond sunbursts, the sunbursts are going on me—much as I detest diamonds!"

"Oh, indeed! You told mother that, too. A rotten, shabby trick, Bess! You don't hear me knocking about your affairs."

"I beg your pardon!"

"Your affairs, I said—*affaires*, if you like that better. For instance, the black-eyed man Wrenne. You'd better drop him, my girl; let me tell you that. He's a bad egg, and——"

The servant returned, and replaced the soup with something more substantial. When she had taken herself off, Austin continued:

"I've heard——"

"Austin, you're an awfully poor imitation of a man;—honestly you are! But for these small favors I must be thankful. If I hadn't a brother like you, I shouldn't have known half so much about how bad men can be. So I haven't had many illusions shattered."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes, *indeed!*" she mimicked. "Now, you keep

your nasty tongue away from my affairs, Austin Courtney."

Austin was afraid of his sister in this mood. He covered his fear with sulkiness. Finishing his cigarette, he went to the window and dropped it out, then came back and stood at the girl's elbow.

"What I wanted to tell you," he said, in a different tone, "was that Lee's skipped out for parts unknown, and taken his luggage with him."

Instantly she divined. "You told him about what the prince said!" she accused.

He admitted it. "I thought he ought to know."

She considered.

"Perhaps you're right, Austin. They might have had their suspicions aroused, and sent someone over here to investigate. I didn't like the way that Japanese looked at us when we spoke of the model, either. So Lee's gone! Well——"

She pushed her plate away and rested her head on her hands. The defection of her Chinese mentor meant much to her. His was a place impossible to fill.

"He left a letter and a package for you," continued Austin. "Here they are."

He took them from the sideboard and placed them before her. He was a man lacking the reality of honor with curious absoluteness, but he had those superficial-

ities of the idea which had restrained his curiosity as to contents of letter and package.

Bess excused herself and opened the letter. It was written in English, and in a small, carefully formed chirography.

LITTLE PLUM-BLOSSOM: Austin has told me of the sight which the Prince has had of my picture. It was most unwise, little Flower of My Heart, that such was seen by him, for I am no longer able to remain near you.

All that His Highness told you holds truth in it. I am he of the White Banner of whom he spoke, the exiled Manchu.

There will be no rest now until they have found me and taken from me the Keys of the Door of the Double-Dragon. But of this they shall have no chance, for I leave in the sandalwood box the keys in your keeping.

Guard them as I pray the Gods guard thee.

Thy,

LEE.

"What does he say?"

"That's my business!"

"Oh, indeed!" sneered Austin. "Then, maybe, it'll be *my* business to tell Prince Chu'un how you lied to him; and also that Lee left a letter and a box for you."

"You'd *hardly* do that!"

"Wouldn't I? Well, you keep your eyes on little Austin, and you'll see what he'll do. I'm sick of the way you're treating me, Bess—and—well, I've had enough. What does he say?"

He snatched the letter as he spoke, and read it. She watched him, coldly contemptuous, and said nothing when he gave it back, his eyes glowing with anticipation.

"Bess," he choked, "do you see what this means? Why, he's left us a fortune. The keys to the treasure-house—to the seven thousand eyes of Buddha—the diamonds! Bess, do you realize that he's made us the richest people in the world? That——"

She was unwrapping the package, cutting the string with the pocket-knife Austin had opened and given her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

With the tiny key that had been inclosed in the letter she unlocked the carved sandalwood box. Opening it, she found reposing on a tray of yellow satin a short squat key of rusty iron, cut into many notches. The second tray had a smaller key of copper; the third, diminished in size, was of silver; and the last, and most diminutive, on the bottom tray over the imperial Double-Dragon, a tiny key of gold, carved and twisted into such an utterly fantastic shape that, had they not known it to be a key, they might have speculated incorrectly as to the purpose for which it was intended.

Bess put back the trays and locked the box. Austin was looking at her, stunned.

"We're the richest people in the world," he said dully.

"Austin!"

"Well?" He roused himself.

"Don't be ridiculous, as I told you once before."

"I'm not ridiculous," he said hotly. "We heard the prince say that tradition kept this place from being opened with anything except the official keys. We've got the keys, and, consequently——"

"In the first place," interrupted Bess, in a very quiet tone, the quietness that Austin feared, "these keys were entrusted to me to guard. Consequently they shall be locked away in my safe-deposit vault at the Mercantile Bank until Lee comes back and asks for them."

"Wha-a-a-t!" Austin had sprung to his feet.

"In the second place," she continued without noticing his interruption, "these keys fit doors in the Forbidden City in Peking. People who do not belong to the imperial court are not allowed there. There have been only three or four white people in all history who ever lived in the Forbidden City—and two of them died there!"

"But——"

"In the third place, these diamonds do not belong to us or to anyone who finds them. They are not treas-

ure-trove. They are the property of the Emperor of China. Consequently to take them would be stealing—wouldn't it?"

She arose.

"And, fourthly, Austin Courtney, if you say anything to anybody about Lee or about this affair, I shall leave this house for good and all, and let you shift entirely for yourself. Now, good-night—don't bother me any more."

"Damn her!" muttered Austin, as the door closed behind the painter of Prince Chu'un's portrait.

CHAPTER VI

THE CLIMAX OF CONSPIRING CIRCUMSTANCES

“**D**EAR God!” prayed the girl.

For more than a month Austin had been haunting her, haggard and gaunt-eyed. Numberless times he had tried to confide in her, but the words would not out. But at last, thoroughly wretched, he had torn away the veil, exposed the miserable degrading story.

Two dear old ladies were their maiden aunts. Up to several years before they had conducted a school for little girls; but by an unexpected rise in some inherited real estate they had found themselves the possessors of only a little less than a hundred thousand dollars. On this they retired. Austin had persuaded them to entrust to him the money for investment.

He had speculated with it on his own account—and lost!

The girl was crying softly. She loved them very dearly, Aunt Malvinia and Aunt Kitty. She had always been sure of cake and candy when she went

to see them Sundays. They had been in the habit of buying picture-books and keeping them on the library-table just for her to read. They had denied themselves to help her; had paid for her instruction in painting; had—why, she owed everything to those dear old maiden ladies!

There was the little white house just around the corner from the club; the little white house with the green holland blinds and her great-grandfather's picture in the hall—very gallant that grandsire in his uniform as one of George Washington's aides. There was the much-thumbed copy of "Alice in Wonderland" on her own little reading-table, sacred to her use alone, and with the book-mark that Aunt Kitty had embroidered. The paintings of Austin and herself, side by side, in the little reception-room, dusted every day by loving hands, thin, wrinkled, gentle, patrician hands. Dear Aunt Malvinia and Aunt Kitty!

Eeverybody loved them! It was to their school that all the débutantes had gone until they were old enough for convent or boarding-school. Eeverybody had been rejoiced that they were now able quietly to live out the autumn of their lives—for there was no winter for such as they. It was too harsh a term. Theirs was the autumn, the golden-brown, kindly autumn. And now——

"Dear God!"

"Well, well?" Austin demanded fretfully. "What are we going to do—eh? What are we going to do?"

The eyes of brother and sister met. He shrank at the fire gleaming from behind the tear-stained lashes.

"You low *beast!*" said the girl.

"Well?"

She did not answer him, but went, rather, to the studio window overlooking the park, parted the curtains, and stared out across the park. Again her sorrow overcame her, and she fell among the cushions of the bay windows, sobbing, choking out her grief.

Austin came nearer.

"Now, now!" he soothed.

"I hate you. Go away."

"You've got to face it, haven't you?" he asked doggedly. "And how? You can't raise more than a few thousand at the most. I can't raise a rotten penny. Ever since they made me resign at the bank I've been on my uppers, and you know it. I thought I could make good—Bess, I was going to give them half the profits—it would have been a good thing for them, too. And it looked easy, so damned easy. I stood to make fifty per cent on the investment. I'd have paid my debts and had a goodish lot left. It was a——"

"If I'd only known!" she said, in a low, strained

voice. "If I'd only known! But I never dreamed of your having it—never dreamed of it. I thought they had it in bank—safe in bank."

"They did—drawing a miserable three and a half per cent! I got 'em to get it out and——"

She sat up and faced him. Her tone was vicious.

"I wish you were dead, Austin Courtney; quite dead, quite dead."

He laughed recklessly.

"You've got a good chance of your wish coming true when this comes out—no mistake there!"

"It *mustn't* come out—mustn't. It must be paid back. I suppose you understand that, Austin. I can go on giving them enough to make them think the interest's being drawn. After that——"

"Well—what?" he demanded. "That's all in your eye, you know. How are you going to pay it back? Art's no money-maker. If you make six thousand a year you're doing well—and we need all of that."

"*We?*" Much to sting him in that tone.

"Why, you little——" But he only said that much, for the light in her eyes frightened him. He averted his gaze, and there was a silence for a time almost interminable to both of them. Then he spoke suddenly.

"There *is* a way!"

She waited for him to explain.

"How about the keys that Lee left? A handful of those diamonds would pay the whole hundred thousand—and a hanged sight more! Not many—not enough to be missed—just a handful, Bess. Why, what good are they doing anybody where they are? And they'd never be missed."

"No," she said, and sat silent. He became angry, and mocked her.

"You're afraid! Sunday-school scruples say it's wrong—wrong to take something that nobody has any use for, to keep a whole family from disgrace, to keep me from shooting myself, to keep your aunts out of the poorhouse!"

She bit her lip and breathed heavily. This was her brother speaking, her brother!

He went on, not realizing his peril.

"You'd rather see our Baltimore friends take up a collection to keep the old tabbies out of the poorhouse, would you? Oh, yes, I dare say you would. That's better of you—why, you devil!"

For, with a sudden swing of her arm she had struck him squarely in the mouth with clenched hand. He almost fell. Afraid to face her, he covered his face with his hands.

"Don't, Bess!"

The angry crimson in her cheeks faded out into whiteness. She paused, her fingers relaxed.

"No, I *won't*!"

It was that very quiet tone that Austin had heard before and which showed him the naked unmanliness of himself.

"No, I won't touch so poor a thing as you, Austin Courtney! A *thing* that steals from helpless old women and foists its burden on another woman. Women! They've been very good to you, *haven't* they, Austin? They like the way you smile at them, the way your hair waves! They like you, *don't* they, Austin? Men *don't*, do they? Because men know men; and you aren't a man. No, only a *thing* that finds women useful—and a *thief*! And you want me to be a thief, too—to save you!"

"Bess!"

"Yes, that's the naked truth, isn't it? You want me to save you! Do you care what becomes of Aunt Malvinia and Aunt Kitty? Not the tiniest little bit, Austin Courtney. No! That's the lever to work me with. Because you know how I care for them, how terribly fond I've always been of them. So you try to use that to save yourself—and—you've a good conception of women's weaknesses. For I *would* steal those jewels for Aunt Kitty and Aunt Malvinia."

Her last words dissipated to his mind all the contumely. He had won. She would do it.

"You—you *will*?" he stammered.

"I said I *would*," she returned quietly. "But there's no way—no possible way. The jewels are in the Forbidden City. How am I—to——"

He interrupted, eagerly suggesting.

"Split it with Wrenne. He's not the kind to turn down a proposition like that! He's going back to Peking. He's got the run of the Forbidden City. You give him the key and get him to do it for you, and let him take his share!"

"Impossible!" burst from her.

"Why?"

She was at a loss to answer him fitly. The idea advanced represented surely the sensible thing to do. She had no reason to believe from what she knew of the gentleman adventurer that he would do anything save eagerly accept such a chance for wealth. His casque of reputation bore no stainless white plume. He was a plotter, intriguer, hired mercenary. As a boy dismissed from the service of his own country for evil habits, he had seemed to carry out the future prophesied for him. Why not, then?

She reasoned this very thoroughly, but still she re-

peated her negative when Austin would have convinced her.

“You want him to think you’re a little tin saint, eh?”

Rightly had she named Austin’s influence. He had little brain, less reasoning power, no moral standards; but a keen intuition where the other sex was concerned stood him in lieu of the first two lacks and abetted the last. Bess tried to disguise her angry, labored breathing by holding her breath. She dared not risk speaking at all.

Until Austin had made his comment, she had not known herself. But it was truth. She *did* covet this man’s belief in her goodness, or, rather, her striving after the better things. She liked to believe that she was an influence for better in his life. It was quite plain to her that if he became her co-partner in the scheme to take the diamonds there would come the shattering of the standards she had set for him to measure her by.

Austin continued, with an angry sneer:

“That’s your style. Get a goody-goody boy and you try to make him bad—look at Tommy Worthington that you used to call prude because he thought it a sin to bet on races and be a game ’un. Then you get hold of this chap who is an out-and-out rake and tell him how wicked he is, and——”

"That's enough!" she said rising. "Quite enough. You'd better go down to the station and take the train home. I shan't be over to-night. I'll stay here and try to think this out, somehow, then——"

She stopped. Someone was coming up the stairs, two at a step. She waited until she heard the knock on the door.

"Hello, Bess! In?"

"There's Wrenne, now!" said Austin, in an excited whisper. "Let me stay and arrange the whole thing right now."

But she had been abruptly reminded of another reason she had forgotten. The keys that she held had been entrusted to her by Gordon Lee. She had no ownership in them. They were not even hers by right of the person who had stolen them.

"Austin, I can't," she said, in a low tone. "I'd forgotten about Lee, too. He trusted me with the keys. I can't go back on him. It's off, Austin, all off——"

He flung out a furious curse.

"Heavens, how wicked!" remarked the man on the other side of the door politely. "Want any assistance, Bess?"

"Come in, Colonel Wrenne."

They heard him open the door and heard the clatter

of his stick and hat on a side-table. It was too dark to more than vaguely distinguish his form.

"Who's here? Oh, you—Courtney! I thought I recognized your style in that remark I caught."

"Look here, Wrenne," said Austin shortly. "You're not personal supervisor of my manners, you know. Nor are you in any way entitled to call me down as often as you do. I want you to remember that!"

Wrenne answered him coolly:

"You can be as boorish as you like to other people—and to me. I don't mind! But it strikes me you aren't sufficiently impressed with the fact that you are pretty much of a lucky dog to have Bess for a sister. Therefore——"

Bess interfered. "The discussion isn't in very good taste," she said coldly.

"You're right, it isn't. But I wasn't harking back to old things. Something's happened to-day—something that gives you somewhat of a laurel wreath—did you know that, Bess?"

"No. What is it?" She was not greatly interested.

"I don't know that I should forestall the prince. You see, he's coming here in a few minutes to tell you himself. So when he does you want to make him believe you haven't heard it before. But I wanted to be the first person to bring you the news!"

Now she was aware that the matter was of importance. But her head was too full of the other affair to give her a clue to his meaning.

"Your painting arrived in Peking a few days ago. The emperor inspected it yesterday, and immediately wired to the prince to bring you back to China with us to paint *his* portrait! Now, what do you say to that? To paint the portrait of His Imperial Majesty, Kwang-Hsu!"

It was fortunate for her that it was dark. As it was, he did not see her face nor her gestures, nor the greedy eyes of Austin Courtney lighting up.

"I—I can't accept," she said presently.

"Can't accept!" shouted Austin. "Can't——"

Wrenne broke in.

"My dear girl," he soothed, "that's foolish. Chu'un and I are returning to China next week. We have a special train across country, and a special section of a liner reserved for us. You will have every convenience and will be looked after absolutely. Think what it means! You'll have the run of the Forbidden City. You'll paint the emperor's portrait, get an inside view into a life that will be invaluable to you in your work—and, besides, I want you to come."

She knew that he did. She did not tell him that was one of her reasons for refusing. The other was

Gordon Lee's trust in her. A third might have been found in the fact that she could not accept the hospitality of those from whom she intended to steal.

"Of course you'll accept," Wrenne went on. "Now, if you will pardon me, I'll go out into the hall and telephone the Willard. I want you to dine with me to-night and talk over arrangements. I dare say the prince will be here in a moment or so."

He left brother and sister alone again. Austin gripped her arm.

"Think of the chance! Think of it! The way's wide open. You don't have to call on Wrenne. You can do the trick yourself—yourself! Think of it! And you're refusing! You don't mean it, Bess, you don't mean it. Do you want to see Aunt Malvinia and Aunt Kitty——"

"That's enough!"

"Well, it isn't enough," he continued furiously. "Not enough for me, at any rate. I'll see whether you——"

"I can't do it, Austin," she said.

Having regained her composure in all seemingness, she switched on the electric lights which glowed out of Bohemian glass vases on mantels and filigreed lamps swung from the ceiling. The glow fell warmly on rugs and carved furniture, on the walls covered

with pictures, framed and otherwise, sketches in inks, studies in water-colors, a few small oils. Looking down from his place by the window, Austin saw a carriage draw up before the curb of the house. A robed figure got out, followed by several others.

"Here comes the prince," he said, with savage intensity. "You'll be sorry every day of your life after this if you turn this thing down."

They waited in silence for the prince's rap. When it came, Bess opened the door for him, greeting him and the Japanese, Ito Ugichi, who followed with several of the legation attachés whom Bess knew only slightly—gravely smiling Chinese with intensely indifferent countenances.

She asked the prince and his companions to have tea. He refused, with formal politeness.

"This—it is official, Miss Portrait-Painter," he said. "Wung-Han, will you give to the young lady the scroll you have prepared?"

One of the legation attachés handed her a formal-looking roll of parchment from which dangled several seals. For all the solemnity of the occasion and the issues involved, her sense of the ludicrous harked forward a simile of her childhood. Wung-Han marvelously resembled the Frog Footman.

Following the delivery, the attaché indulged in the

peroration prepared for the occasion, a seemingly unending affair, which brought in all the titles, appellations, and similes advertising to His Imperial Majesty. Prince Chu'un's explanation, which followed in English, summed the matter up much as Hamilton Wrenne had done.

The emperor was pleased with Prince Chu'un's portrait. He wished the same hand to paint one of himself. He tendered to the painter the freedom of the sacred city, and would have a palace put aside for her special use. The remuneration was to be whatever she desired, her expenses were to be paid, and, in conclusion, the emperor wished her long life and many sons.

All in a daze, she thanked the prince, trying to lead up in some way to a refusal. She knew she must refuse; but, somehow, the words stuck in her throat. She looked dully across to where Austin glowered at her.

The silence that ensued was broken by the shrill whistling of some popular street song on the part of someone ascending the stairs. The whistling came to a close when the whistler knocked sharply on the door.

"Come in!"

A boy in the blue of the Postal Telegraph stopped

on the threshold, gazing at the various dignitaries in no evident embarrassment.

"Gee!" he said.

Bess looked at him. "Well, little boy?"

"You Miss 'Lizabeth Courtney?"

She nodded. He came across to her with a queer side-step of a gait, and gave her a telegram. She signed for it, and, excusing herself to those present, broke it open.

MAYANALAINÉ BERMUDAS,

The seventh.

MISS ELIZABETH COURTNEY,

Washington City, U. S. A.

Chinese known as G. Lee died here to-day, leaving unofficial will bequeathing a thousand dollars and other properties to you. Wire instructions.

K. L. HAYDEN,

Vice-Consul, U. S.

She put up one hand to loosen the ruching at her neck. The room seemed hot—she was gasping for air.

"The window, Austin," she choked.

It was a genuinely alarmed Austin who allowed the air to come through the room. The girl sat down and folded the telegram with trembling hands, putting it, for security, in her belt.

"Any answer, lady?"

She shook her head, and the Postal Telegraph boy went out. He picked up the strain of his song where he had left it when he entered, and the assembled company heard it until he slammed the door below. Even then the echo of it floated up from the street through the open window.

Gordon Lee was dead! He had left everything to her—including the keys to the doors of the Double-Dragon. It seemed that circumstances were conspiring to make of her a thief. She had no excuse now, none! Each one had been swept away by the conspiring circumstances.

"Little Miss Portrait-Painter," said Prince Chu'un, "you are very ill—we do not trouble you more. We go."

He made a sign to his companions. They moved toward the door. But it was opened for them from the outside, and Hamilton Wrenne entered. He saluted the prince gravely, and turned to Bess.

"Well—the prince has told you?"

She nodded. Somewhat taken aback by her appearance, he came forward and put a hand solicitously on her shoulder.

She looked up. The prince was smiling in kindly fashion, but there was a certain amount of expectancy

in his glance. Austin was glowering at her. Black Wrenne was tender.

“So you’re going with us, Bess?”

The girl got up and crossed the floor to where the prince stood. She bowed her head and made a motion of carrying Chu’un’s long, clawlike hands to her lips.

Turning, she looked at Wrenne.

“Yes,” she said.

BOOK THE SECOND

CHAPTER I

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE SON OF HEAVEN

PRINCE CHU'UN and his escort had entered the imperial city the night before, leaving Bess at the American legation in the Tartar city. It was arranged that she should have her audience in the morning.

The American legation held forth in a former Chinese temple, just under the red walls of the imperial city, named "forbidden" by the foreigners. The official green chair that came for Bess had, therefore, not far to be carried by the palanquin-bearers, sturdy coolies in the trappings of imperial servants. Before the chair went soldiers of the Palace Guard, driving the staring natives out of the way. On either side of the chair were more of the military to prevent the lower orders from crowding the chair; and behind marched yet more for the same purpose.

Bess did not fancy the Tartar city. It was picturesque, but very dirty and smelly. Water, long stagnant, lay in broken places of the causeway, and

heaps of refuse cried aloud to heaven. She found her relief in inspecting the lacquered fronts of the shops, and the red signs and pennants which swung with the wind, advertising in up-and-down ideographs the merits of various brands of edibles. But this was all much of a sameness; and she breathed a sigh of relief when they reached one of the great gates in the wall surrounding the imperial city.

The officer of the guard cried, gutturally, to the guardians of the gate, and it swung open. Bess had a little shiver of apprehension. She wished suddenly for the presence of Hamilton Wrenne. She remembered that she was entirely alone and about to go within the mysterious city of which she had heard so many gruesome tales. The thought of why she had come suddenly chilled her.

The palanquin had passed over the stone bridge of the canal while she was in the grip of her terror. Looking from the windows, she saw the battlements, turrets, and moat of the Winter Palace, its walls, once red, now softened to a pale cherry hue. Hamilton Wrenne had described the palace so often to her, en route, that she could not fail to recognize it.

The raised road over which she was being carried was a picture of animated color, with its official chairs of green, bedizened carts, and splendidly trapped

horses. One must go gayly attired into the imperial city, and all were obedient. Here Greater China was represented; the melancholy, mustached Tartars; the apparently noseless Mongols, fur-dressed and leather-booted, the nobles among them riding on gaudily hung camels; the yellow-gowned lamas from the temples; the Cantonese striving to make up in color for what they lacked in stature; the strapping Manchus, seldom short of six feet, striding majestically as though conscious of the fact that their dynasty ruled. Here one had attachés of the Foreign Office and the yamens, taotais, and viceroys come to "save their faces"; officers of the army riding white horses—all Chinese these officers with two exceptions, a rather large-statured Japanese, who passed, talking with a fresh-faced young Englishman who looked as though he might have been a Sandhurst boy.

And now the great fact of the palace itself!

Bess was not prepared for the intricate array of winding passages, high walls, heavy gates, and huge, iron-spiked doors through which they passed after entering the palace gates. She reflected, with a shudder, on the impossibility of Bess Courtney, stranger, finding her way out of the palace without assistance. More keenly than ever she regretted her resolve. Her face was very white, her lips pale. To embark on

such a quest in a country where the Chinese are much mocked and little feared was a different thing from assuming nonchalance as to the same purpose when the mystery, secrecy, and strength of the Ming dynasty was made manifest to her.

Her green chair had been changed for a red one, after entering the great gate, and in this she was carried through a labyrinth of white, paved courts, until she came to a very central one, where a number of cedar-trees sheltered the stones from the heat of the morning sun, and where beautiful shrubs, plants, and flowers almost intoxicated her with their perfume. She found that her chair had been lowered to the ground. She stepped out.

A number of palace eunuchs in embroidered robes of office were bowing to her. Three of them preceded her, making signs that she was to follow. The others took up the rear. The plate-glass doors of the palace, resplendent with a huge character enameled in red and indicating longevity, swung back without noise. She entered, and found herself in the throne-room.

It was a long hall, paved with blocks of black marble, having red walls and a dome-shaped roof, that glinted gold in the morning sunlight. In the center of the south side were the great doors through which she had entered, directly opposite a red-

lacquered throne, approached by five steps of varying widths. Near the throne were gathered the ladies of the court, splendid in their gold-embroidered costumes, with gems on their capes and flowers in their hair. As the eunuch stood by the door calling out in low gutturals, several of these court ladies approached Bess, and one of them spoke to her, quite prettily, in English.

"You are the portrait-painter? I am Na-Leng. My father was minister to your country at one time——"

She spoke a trifle stiltedly, and had the usual difficulty with her r's. Pretty she was not, according to European standards, but Bess, familiar with the Oriental idea, knew that Na-Leng was most greatly desired. She was in a long loose gown of rare satin stuff, painted with bird-and-sky effects, wore a profusion of jewelry and ornaments, and had on satin boots with white kid soles. Bess knew her at once for a Manchu girl and one of high rank.

"I want to be your flend," said Na-Leng. "You remember me—now I go back. Come. She approaches."

Some cymbals and flutes sounded the Imperial Hymn, preceding the coming of majesty. The doors were thrown open. Two lines of gorgeously vested eunuchs walked stiff-legged into the court. In the

sudden quietness an open chair was carried to the center of the hall. Another chair followed. It was put down alongside the first. Behind the first chair stood a maid of honor, while behind the second was Hamilton Wrenne in the full dress of the Chinese Army.

Their majesties alighted. The dowager empress took the throne-seat, her nephew, the emperor, seating himself on a hassock by her side. Bess surveyed them both with eager eyes.

The much-discussed Tze-Hsi was in a gown of stiff, transparent silk, embroidered with pearls and fastened on one side from neck to hem with jade buttons. About her neck was a rope of pearls having for pendant a large, pale ruby. Her hair was parted in the middle and brought over her brows. The third and fourth finger-nails of either hand were like talons, and were protected by gold guards. She wore no paint, and her skin was fresh, having the appearance of youth. Her eyes had in them a contemptuous kindliness, but her small mouth had cruel lines about it.

The emperor looked to be little more than a boy, although Bess knew him to be nearer thirty-five than thirty. He was slim, slight, and short, and had the face of a monk or a priest—the ascetic type. His mouth and chin were not lacking in strength; but his

gaze was aimless, his eyes without concentration. He was simply dressed in a gown of yellow brocade, belted tightly about a waist, of the smallness of which, in common with his hands and feet, he was quite proud. Looking keenly for the signs of weakness she sought, Bess discovered that his forehead, while high, receded as it neared his glossy hair; also that his hands and lips had an odd habit of twitching nervously.

Wrenne acted as interpreter, and Bess was greeted graciously. She formally accepted the offer of the emperor, and was requested to name her preference of abiding-places while she dwelt within the "violet city."

She trembled before she answered. She knew, from stealthily questioning Wrenne while on shipboard, that the Temple of the Double-Dragon was a small one, erected within the Gardens of the Invisible Deity; knew also that a small pavilion, the Arbor of Buddha's Hand, overlooked the temple and gave access to it through the gardens. Without mentioning specifically the place she wanted, she described the pavilion to Wrenne, who translated her remarks to their majesties. The Arbor of Buddha's Hand occurring to them, the emperor inquired of the head eunuch as to its tenancy, and was answered that it was closed. It

was ordered to be opened, refurnished, and heated, being made in all ways ready for the portrait-painter.

The emperor rose. The arbor, he informed Bess, would be ready the next morning. He begged that at that time she take possession of it, and at eleven o'clock be ready for his first sitting. He would come to the Arbor for his sittings, that the Sacred Picture might not be touched unnecessarily by the hands of servants.

The empress arose, also. The audience was ended.

"Go back to the legation," Wrenne whispered. "I shall see you this afternoon. To-morrow a chair will bring you here and a cart will bring your belongings to-day——"

He was quickly on salute, and stepped behind the chair of the emperor, waiting until the imperial pair had been borne away, then attaching himself to Prince Chu'un, who had sat throughout the ceremony on the lower steps of the throne in company with several cousins of the royal house. Bess, recognizing him, thanked him again for his good offices.

The prince smiled, disclaiming, and asked if she cared to inspect the palaces of the imperial city. If so, he would put his servants at her disposal and ask the court ladies to accompany her as escort. But the

excitement of the morning was enough for the girl, and she asked that he repeat his offer at some later period.

He went away with Wrenne; and the eunuchs, conducting her to her chair, Bess was taken to the palace gates, her chair changed again, and carried from out of the imperial city back to the American legation. On arriving at the latter place, her first act was to send the servant assigned to her for brandy, and of this she took more than she had ever permitted herself before. Her nerves in a normal state, she went down to lunch with the American minister's wife and family.

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN KOMOTO IS PROMISED THE GOLDEN KITE

ITO UGICHI and he whom his countrymen called Gray Fox were once again in conference. The room in which they sat might have been the same as the last meeting-place in furnishing and general appearance, but instead of overlooking the yellow Connecticut Avenue cars, whirring motors, and fashionable crowds of Washington's thoroughfare, it looked out on the inner court of the legation in Peking. Gray Fox was again in the costume of his country, his gray kimono embroidered with cranes, his obi-sash blood-colored. His feet in *getas* were stretched out before him, and he contemplated them without expression.

Ugichi, in the frock coat grown habitual with him outside his native country, was smoking a cigarette and watching Kitsune-San. The Gray Fox had not spoken since the greetings had passed between them.

"Is thy thesaurus of speech depleted that thou grudgest of its contents to me, Samurai?" asked Ugichi.

Gray Fox looked up.

"I have seen to it that the rifles, the ammunition, and the supplies have been landed," he said slowly. "Not fifteen miles from Tongku, there is a cave well known to the opium-smugglers, and this holds the wherewithal of rebellion against Kwang-Hsu. For these expenses Nippon is sorely taxed. Thou didst propound to me in Washington a plan by which the seven thousand eyes of Buddha should refund Nippon—and hast thou so replenished the exchequer of the Son of Heaven?"

"Truly I have not," answered Ugichi.

"Thou hast not! The servant of the emperor would now have reasons."

"By Kappa! thou shalt have them, gnawing Gray Fox!" The Count Ugichi showed a spot of color on either sallow cheek-bone. His voice was that of a man wronged. "Think you, now, what I have done. Was it not I who months ago, in Washington, detected the falsity of the potrait-painter's speech when she spoke concerning the picture of the exiled son of the White Banner? Knew I not then that she lied, and did I not discover where lay the Manchu, Li-Wung-Kih, who called himself Gordon Lee? He became imbued with thy cunning, that of the fox, and fled to the Bermuda Islands; but forth on his trail went

Yedo, the agent, with my orders to take from him the keys. Yedo returned. He had killed this Gordon Lee with a subtle poison, had examined his clothing when dead, had searched among his properties for the keys of the door of the Double-Dragon. Found he them? No! Kappa* is in my luck—and then——”

“Then you discovered that the keys were in the possession of the portrait-painter herself. That I remember. Recount not thy own craftiness, Ito-san. Thou art very cunning. Proceed.”

“It is as Gray Fox says. She had the keys, wearing them always about her neck upon a chain that was very strong. In San Francisco did not our cleverest agents brush again her in crowds, provoke small riots, do all that might give a chance for the keys to be snatched. But how fortunate they? One is in their jail, another in their hospital. She hath in Hamilton Wrenne a protector—the black-visaged man of the great secretness. Knew I well we should be enemies, Samurai. It is so.”

“What further attempts?”

“As much as any man, even as much as thee, the wise and most machinating *furu danuki*.† On

* The demon of hell.

† Old fox.

the steamship I had agents among the ship-boys, all of whom attempted and failed. She wears the keys next her skin and over them a close, very tight-fitting jersey high in the neck. Once I had nearly won. By great secrecy and caution that same agent, Yedo, serving as a ship-boy, had entered her cabin late in the night; had with his knife slit open the night-dress that she wore, only to find naught save bare skin—for she wore the jersey not at night, nor the keys about her neck. He searched most secretly among her bags and boxes, finding nothing, and was interrupted in the task by her awakening. Ever afterward a soldier of Prince Chu'un slept outside her door—what chance, then?"

"Bribery!"

"'Twas tried, and failed. To his master Prince Chu'un the soldier told the tale, and my Yedo was landed at Honolulu ironed and manacled as a criminal. He is also of the Samurai, this Yedo-san.

The Gray Fox nodded. "And further?"

"Her room was entered while she slept, in the Astor Hotel, in Shanghai. Again naught was found, naught worn. The keys are no longer in her possession, Gray Fox. She hath given them to this Hamilton Wrenne to keep for her. They have been enclosed in a sealed silver box and this swung upon a

chain again—for this was done while she waited in a silversmith's in Shanghai and while a guard of soldiers, ordered by the Taotai as her escort, waited without the shop. The sealed silver box she gave to Black Wrenne. Samurai, we must rid us of this incubus of a Wrenne. His presence is parlous to the cause of the Son of Heaven. Besides the keys, much power hath he with Chu'un, much too much, Gray Fox."

"But thou saidst——"

"Said I my power was the greater? Yes, I remember. Kwannon grant I was not in error. *Ijin-san** hath me in doubt. Very useful he hath been in my plotting, knowing, as he doth, the strength of all the armies of China, and those liable to defection. But his work is done now. He can help me no more. He were well out of the way."

Gray Fox meditated. "And with him out of the way, Ugichi, it might be that the keys——"

Count Ito grinned in his meaningless fashion. "If he is then to see the black Omi-angel, why not in the presence of faithful Japanese who might procure from him the keys to the door of the Double-Dragon? Speak I wisely, Gray Fox?"

They eyed one another.

*The foreigner.

"Wisely, indeed!" said Gray Fox, and fell to meditating again. Presently he raised his eyes.

"It is for the emperor, Ito-san. What is one man that he should stand in the way of the emperor's desire? We have originated this plan to put Chu'un on the throne; have provided the brains, the money, the rifles, the munitions of war—even the men, in part. Knowest thou that between Peking and Tientsin there are scattered some five thousand of our race, members of the army of the emperor?"

Ito nodded. "Long since I knew that, Gray Fox. Also do I remember that at Shan-hai-kuan among the allied garrisons there is a full regiment ready to write their names in the Bushi Kanjo—and as thou hast said: Are the time, the money, the men, and the emperor's desire to go for naught because one Black Wrenne opposeth the path? Nay, Samurai! Scruples are well enough for a robber Eta who pilfers on his own account—for him there is the law. For those who act at the emperor's wish there is no question of law."

"Light of the Son of Heaven!" murmured Gray Fox.

He reached for a bell-rope, pulling it. A servant, answering, was told to fetch Captain Komoto, who would be found below. A surmise as to Gray Fox's purpose lightened the eyes of Ito Ugichi, but he said

nothing of it, waiting in silence until a Japanese in the blue uniform and patent-leather top-boots of the army entered and saluted.

"You sent for me, honorable ones," he murmured.

"Komoto, thou knowest a certain *Ijin-san* holding rank in the army of China—one Wrenne, whom they call the Black!"

Komoto assented.

"He imperils the welfare of the mikado, Komoto-san!"

Komoto's hand went to his sword-hilt.

"To the enemies of the Son of Heaven, what, Komoto-san?"

"Let those of the Akuki be speedily delivered to the maw of the Red Dragon!" answered Komoto symbolically.

"Takest thou service under the Red Dragon, Komoto-san? Wilt be his purveyor?"

"For the glory of the emperor—what not?"

"Let the golden kite be writ large upon thy breast, son of the Samurai! Amadi Butsu guide thy steps to paradise."

Gray Fox discarded the sonorous symbolic syllables, becoming suddenly practical. "Thou hast many men that thou mayest trust, Komoto?"

"All serve the emperor!" answered the captain oracularly.

"It is well. Now it were not difficult to take five of these men and attire them as Chinese coolies—to put false cues upon their heads, and wadded garments upon their persons."

"It were not difficult, son of the Daimio——"

Gray Fox raised his hand, regarding him sternly. "The days of Daimios are past. There is but one ruler—the emperor! Forgottest thou, Komoto?"

The officer seemed humbled. "I crave pardon, Kitsune-san.* It were difficult to me to forget, I who was born in a humble *shoji* very near the palace of thy illustrious father. Again I crave pardon."

"Offend not again, Captain Komoto. Touching on the matter of the five mock Chinese. You said it were not difficult?"

Komoto bowed.

"Nor would it be difficult if these five mock Chinese met with this Black Wrenne in the purlieu of the Chinese city, whither he goes each night to inspect his soldiers keeping guard upon the walls?"

Kimoto bowed again.

"And should accident occur to this Black Wrenne—should he tumble from a wall and be utterly de-

* Mr. Fox.

molished, there could be no harm in opening his garments and finding hung about his neck a silver box on a chain, eh, Komoto-san?"

"There could be no harm, Gray Fox," echoed the soldier.

"Keep thou and thy five mock Chinese sharp watch, then, for his fall! And when thou hast the silver box bring it to thy unworthy preceptor. For this watchfulness of thine, thy name shall be recorded in the unwritten book of noble deeds. *Sayonara.*"

The officer hesitated.

"Were it better for the emperor that this Black Wrenne fell from his perch this night or a later one——"

"The emperor liketh ill the song of the black wren. This is a bird of ill favor with him. Shall the emperor's ears be longer offended than his servant may compass?"

"I am ashamed, Gray Fox!"

"No need of shame. That only when one has failed. And should the light shine upon a deed which thou hast committed outside the laws of nations, wouldst say it was in thy emperor's service, Komoto-san?"

The captain drew himself up stiffly.

"Hath not Komoto-san private revenges that he may

wreak, son of the Daimio? Hath he not a tongue to cry aloud these satiations of revenge?"

Gray Fox gave him his hand. "Thou shalt yet be read in the Bushi Kanjo, Komoto-san. Thy very excellent good health. *Sayonara!*"

"*Sayonara*, honorable ones."

He saluted and went out. Gray Fox rubbed his hands. The Count Ito Ugichi grinned in his meaningless way.

CHAPTER III

IN THE GARDEN OF THE INVISIBLE DEITY

THE Arbor of Buddha's hand was so called because within the precincts of its garden grew numbers of trees bearing the fruit which has for name the religious synonym—fruit much of the same variety as a lemon but more fragrant and shaped in such a way as to vaguely resemble a hand. In the center of the garden was a lotus-covered lake, on the edges of which grew quantities of asters and peonies, also several variations of the orchid family. Cedar-trees flourished there, having dwarfed cypresses for companions. From the marble terrace of the pavilion Bess could note the Temple of the Double-Dragon rising above the tops of the cedars, approached by one hundred steps, flanked on four platforms by small outhouses with curving crenellated roofs. The sight was an obsession with her. Many times she found herself leaving her work and drifting to the terrace to gaze at the temple with its lacquered columns

and porticos, and the great golden Double-Dragon sprawling across its doors.

Behind the temple rose a great wall, ten feet in thickness, gray-pink in hue, and this same wall extended on all four sides of the garden. His majesty gained access to the pavilion through the imperial archway on the south side, and Hamilton Wrenne came through the little door on the north. It was by a special dispensation only that this was allowed, for the Arbor of Buddha's Hand flanked the ladies' precincts of the palaces, to which no male was supposed to come save on ceremonial occasions.

There were five rooms in the pavilion, separated by walls of carven wood, in which were panels of white and blue silk painted with poems and representations of cranes, peacocks, dwarfed trees, and demons. The entire front facing the Double-Dragon Temple was a concatenation of plate-glass windows which might be released and swung outward by pressing ingenious catches. The lower windows were provided with blue silken curtains that rolled into graceful folds.

In the front room Bess had set up her easel and canvas and arranged her painting paraphernalia. Here, also, had been brought one of the great red lacquer thrones on which the emperor sat while pos-

ing. Several European chairs had been brought in for Bess' comfort, but she preferred the couch built into the wall, when tired. The second room was her boudoir, the third her sleeping-apartment, the fourth her dining-room, while the fifth was used by the servants as a pantry, the cooking being done in a little outhouse. The pavilion was heated by porcelain stoves and fires built under the floors.

Nearly two weeks had passed since Bess had come to live within the violet city, and during that time she had not ventured forth from beyond the high red walls. Every morning at ten Kwang-Hsu came for a sitting of half an hour, and during the rest of the day she worked over what she had blocked in. Sometimes Na-Leng or some of the ladies of the court came for her and took her on tours of inspection. On several occasions she witnessed performances of the Royal Players. Three times she had lunched with the young empress and her maids of honor. But the days were mostly taken up with work and the visits of Hamilton Wrenne, who came every afternoon through the small gateway at the north.

He came generally at sundown and remained until the Gardens of the Invisible Deity were hung with the black wings of the Night-Dragon under whose protection fluttered the good ancestor spirits, waving

their silver lanterns—she recalled the picturesque simile of the Lady Na-Leng, as she sat there this night and watched Wrenne in the starlight.

She had begun to know that his presence was necessary to her, and without his visits she would be like the little nightingale in the silver cage that hung by the windows. The simile called to mind the fact that the little bird's head was drooping, his feathers ruffled. She arose and opened the door of the cage. Gladly he fled into the night, and from the near-by branch of a cedar-tree poured out a flood of song.

"Hello!" said Wrenne. "You don't seem to appreciate the value of that little songster, Bess."

She shook her head. "Oh, yes, I do. But the poor thing was so unhappy when I first got him. I let him out twice a day. He'll always come back. See!"

She stepped on the terrace and whistled softly, cooingly. She, too, was in the starlight now, and it touched her golden-brown hair, seeming to fondle it. The stray curls at ears and brow and neck fluttered in the early night wind, fluttered against that pure, white skin, and brought the tint of wild roses to the cheeks. The nightingale's song ceased. He fluttered uncertainly on his perch, then came flying back and perched on the dainty finger outstretched toward him. The girl stroked its feathers and bent her head over,

whispering to it. Instinctively it rubbed its feathers against her soft cheek.

"Coo-oo," she breathed to it again. It turned its wise little head, surveying her with attentive eyes, then, released by the motion of her hand, flew away again.

She turned to Wrenne. "You see?"

He saw more than she had intended—the brown eyes soft with the mystery of the thoughts of night-fall, the thoughts that her conscious mind hardly read. There was perfume wafted into his face, perfume he knew to be of the garden, but sweet in the thought that it was no sweeter than she.

"Whispering trees, soft summer breeze,
Moon shining bright from above——"

She had begun to hum the song, hardly remembering the rest of it which dealt with lover's arms and other accessories of a divine night. It was a tribute to the evening that nature had provided, and to the man himself, in that he provided no jarring element.

But he had not forgotten the words of the song, if she had. There was color in his cheeks, too, as he came forward, nearly touching her. She was subtly entrancing, a creature for the evening mists, for rose-

gardens and mystic moons. Her charm was as pervasive as the perfume of springtime, as delusive as a stray moonbeam. She was too daintily ethereal for the workaday world of every-day. Here in the temple-grove on the marble terrace, with the moon and stars silvering the night, and the great, mysterious temple's gold roofs towering beyond the cedar-trees, she was the sprite of the illusion, the key to the picture.

"Bess!"

She was not unconscious of his meaning. But at the time, with the enchantment of the good ancestors' silver lanterns in her eyes, she thought of the one word spoken with the infinite tenderness of a lover only as a part of the beautiful night. Looking up and finding him standing so close to her that she could hear the beating of his heart, she was not afraid, only very glad that her soul was light, that it was a glad world, and that he was there.

She looked, lingering over the picture of him, as he stood very gallant in his close-fitting uniform and boots, with the crucifix-hilted sword catching the light. His cap was off, and the rays ran in and out the waves of his black hair and lighted up those intense eyes below the heavy brows. He was at once sinister, debonair, tender, and masterful; perfectly groomed, clean-limbed, every line of face and form

betokening breeding and strength—and in his eyes love for her. To her mind came vaguely thoughts of Bayards, Rolands, and Olivers, compelling composites these: commanders, courtiers, cavaliers. Here was such another. It had taken generations to produce the like of that strong, graceful body and handsome head.

“Hamilton!” she breathed.

“Bess, you do, you do love me, don’t you, Bess?”

And when he had conquered, he was a boy again, eager, petulant, winning, awakening also the mother spirit in her. As she lay in his arms she looked up into the shining eyes.

“How can I help it, Black Wrenne?” she said, with a little, helpless laugh, and stroked his hair with gentle fingers. He was hers to love, to mother, to obey. She might revel in his strange masculine beauty with the thought that it was hers alone.

“And—oh, enough, dear, enough!”

It was a little later when she had freed herself from his arms and caught back her stray curls into prim severity.

“Enough?” he questioned, hurt.

“Enough now, great baby!”

They laughed together, two children for the time.

“And how long have you loved me, Bess, dear?”

“Always, I think,” she answered him. Really she

did not know. The thing had always been vague with her, an influence that had grown and grown until it had overwhelmed her in the greatness of it.

"Yes, always, I think—ever since I met you the second time. But before that—I had ideals—such a man as you. I wanted him big"—she was enumerating on her slim fingers, after the fashion of a schoolgirl—"big and brave and with black hair and black eyes. Just like you, Black Wrenne. Always B's, you see: big and brave and black-haired and black-eyed. And then I met you and knew I'd been thinking about you all the time."

"Did you?" he said, enraptured.

"But, then—then you weren't nice to me, Black Wrenne!"

Where was the woman of the world in this little girl who talked with her mouth pursed up and her eyes upturned to the stars?

"Wasn't I?" he said disgustedly. "What a brute I must have been!"

"Yes, you were," she said, and she was the woman again as she spoke. "And—and I'll tell you a secret. It only made me love you the more because you were a brute to me, Black Wrenne. That was the woman who adored your strength, who thought it better to have you your own way than no way at all. But the

artist in me called for better things from you, wanted you to love me for the better part of me, to bring that better part—there's little enough of it—out into the sunlight and hide the other part in the shadows. But you didn't do that."

"Don't, Bess," he pleaded. "I didn't understand then. At first it was the purely physical man's love for the purely physical woman. And I hadn't had the training to make me very scrupulous. But—that day—I saw *you*—and wanted you a thousand times more. There will always be that of the physical love—that is a part—but besides there is the something you gave me which no other woman did. An utter disregard of self, a desire to do things for you, to make myself spiritually cleaner."

Suddenly she realized that she had bared her heart for the knife-thrust. She had begun this by speaking of her better part—she had begun it. Why hadn't she been content with the fact that he loved her, without dragging in ethics, introspection? While he was trying to make himself better for her sake, she was retrogressing. It became unbearable, the thought that he should ever discover that she had come to Peking to steal—and that was why she had come and what she still must do.

"Bess, I've been a better sort since I met you. For

the past two years I've been grimy with plots and counterplots, lies and treachery, false smiles, and knife-thrusts in the back—the machinations of Orientalism. I had one great ambition—to be the power behind the throne. For this reason I have cultivated Prince Chu'un, made of him a means to an end. And now the way to my ambition lies open ahead of me, Bess. I can be the real ruler of this country in less than a year—the real ruler of the greatest country on earth, of four hundred million people. Think, Bess! I can be that—through Prince Chu'un. For I *am* Prince Chu'un in the will. My way is his way—and the time is at hand."

The wild-rose had fled from her checks, the nightingale was still. Her trembling fingers caught the sleeve of his coat.

"Don't tell me, Hamilton!"

He was strong and big in the moonlight, with his heavy, frowning brows and clean-cut jaws. The fingers trembling on his arm felt the thrill of his hard, vibrant muscles. She was suddenly very much afraid. What would he do when he discovered that he had set up a false idol in her? Would he tear her apart with those strong, brown hands?

"No, maybe I'd better *not* tell you. Because the

path to my ambition is a highway of arson and bloodshed—a shambles of the innocents.”

He caught both her white, trembling hands and kissed their palms.

“Bess!” His voice was suddenly exultant. “I’m going to chuck it all for you, dear—going to chuck it all, d’you understand? Because I want you to feel that you can respect yourself when you love me. You’ve taught me the way to honesty and straight-dealing, dear—the other is hateful to me now. When you finish your picture, we’ll leave Peking together. And then—then, my little wife—eh?”

He was laughing boyishly.

“All mine, all of you. Those glorious eyes, and those beautiful curls, and your rose of a mouth—and the sweet, pure soul of you, Bess, dear!”

She lay in his arms, her face hot, her body trembling; but there was a pall on her brain, and her heart was like lead within her. She had set up for this man an ideal of herself, and he had believed that ideal to be what she represented it, had loved the fictitious Bess and diverted his career for her.

“The road to honesty—to straight-dealing.”

It seemed that the Fengshui demon on the wall panel was grinning at her as he repeated the words. She who had come to Peking to rob—*she* had taught

him that road, she who was not yet a thief only because she had not the courage.

"No, Hamilton," she moaned, "no. Don't talk to me that way. I'm unworthy of it, Hamilton. It was only because I loved you so much that I wanted to have you believe that. But don't believe that, Hamilton—because some day you'll find out it's not so."

But he only laughed and stroked the stray curls.

"Don't, dear Black Wrenne. Don't laugh at me. Indeed, it is so. Please keep on loving me no matter what I am—just love me because I'm Bess, just because I'm this girl that you see—for nothing more except that and that I love you very dearly, Black Wrenne."

"I shall always love you, dear," he said, and bent his head over her.

"But not the ideal, Hamilton, not that. Just Bess. I'm not the stuff to stand the furnace of idealism. Just clay, dear, and that's all. False images won't stand the test. Don't set one up in me, Black Wrenne."

The nightingale was singing again. His notes brought the girl to crying very softly. If Black Wrenne should discover what she had come to do, if he should find that she had stolen like a common thief—would he love her then? Could she dare to hope

that he would? Was that fair? When she had dragged him up to a great love with the picture of a woman who did not exist, could she blame him if the love that she had awakened for this mythical ideal turn away repulsed from the woman who was. No, he could not be blamed. Therefore he must never discover. She must do what she had come for. The picture of her two dear aunts was before her eyes. She must do that—and then she would try to be the sort of woman he imagined her.

"It is because you are what you are that you think so little of yourself," he said gently.

"No," she murmured, wiping away the tears. "No, Hamilton, I'm telling you the truth—you don't believe me, thank God! I pray Him that you won't find out!"

There was a fluttering of wings, a feeble chirp, and unconsciously she put out her finger. The nightingale fastened upon it, regarding her with quick movements of his graceful head.

"I'd rather believe the bird than you!"

And his voice was very tender.

CHAPTER IV

ASSASSINS WHO SHOULD BE PURVEYORS OF THE POOR

THE great bell of Kouan-Lo, in the Tachung-sz' tower, was marking the hour with its golden tongue, a mellifluous clangor that had in it more of music than of noise. The air was heavy with the odor of lotos and *chu-sha-kih* from the barred palace windows of the violet city came the tinkle of the *san-hien* * and the lute, while nearer the gate of the Fung-Hoang a female voice trilled out a song of Kouei to the gilded dragons of the green roof-trees.

It was a very glad world, thought Hamilton Wrenne.

He had come down the causeway unattended, alone, and on foot, reveling in the beauty of the night, intoxicated with the lingering perfume of the girl's presence, and like one in a very beautiful dream who was loath to wake again.

* Guitar.

He answered the salutations of the gate guards mechanically, and bestrode the white horse which his orderly held for him. Touching his mount lightly with his riding-crop, he was off through the Tartar city on his night inspection of the wall-guards.

There was very little thought for his duty to-night. Bess loved him! He said that over many times, unconsciously humming music to fit the words, turning the beauty of the happening and of the night into the blank verse of the lover's litany.

She loved him! He was surprised how little other things mattered—amazed that the hazy future held no fears for him and that he could so readily abandon his cherished projects because they were incompatible with his thoughts of her. Indeed, he was letting them go without regret, finding that he no longer cared for what might detract from her regard for him.

As he told her, he had not been very scrupulous. Since he quitted West Point, an embittered youngster deprived of the fulfillment of a dream that had been his since childhood, he had imagined the world a very cold place, where one kept warm only by the fierceness of antagonism to others. His rise in the Chinese service had been one of those curious sequences of circumstance that sometimes occur to Europeans in foreign countries. Assigned to a post far up-country,

he had found himself in the center of a rebellion with but a handful of troops to cope with it. Alone, he was powerless. By enlisting in his cause the scattered bands of brigands and outlaws, he had relieved the province from rebellion, and as reward turned over the rebels' property to the rapacious crew who had assisted him. Bravery, lack of scruples, and calculating cunning had brought him to high places. Now, for the love of a girl, he was to climb down again when his hands were closing about the reins of government. He would be an ordinary soldier of fortune again, a penniless married adventurer.

But married to Bess! That was the recompense.

The Manchu orderly Thsang had never before noted his officer in so uncritical a mood. There were several grave defections of duty on the part of the soldiers of the wall that went quite without rebuke. One soldier had forgotten the password, another had taken too much *sam-shui* and was close to being drunken, another in saluting brought the barrel instead of the stock of his rifle to ground. Thsang did not understand his lack of interest in these things, so apart were they from his drawing of the character of the envoy of the Black Fir, the name given Wrenne by his soldiery to indicate the bird of black plumage which haunts the fir-tree and is all-seeing, writing down in

the Book of Fate the misdeeds of the Tsing-jin,* and preparing for them adequate punishment. Wrenne had not risen to his height without having earned the reputation of a disciplinarian utterly devoid of mercy.

Now, inspection over, he stood upon the great walls peering away at the ghostly temples and palaces where the dogs of Fo kept their watch; at the swinging lanterns, the illumined kites, the pagodas, the riot of color, of crenellated roofings, porcelain gargoyles, and lacquered goblins. Below, the tracks of the railroad stretching outside the curve of the walls seemed like the trail of the fire-monster, and the engine itself an unreal dragon puffing fire into the silver night; the bobbing light of rickshaws, carts, and pedestrians; only the elves and sprites of the marshes making merry in a fairy city of the night; the figures of the soldiers those of giants keeping watch on the enchanted city, so distorted their size in the shadows.

"Hei-song-che-tsoo!" said Thsang, and gently touched his colonel's sleeve, heavy with gold braid. He was addressing him by the name of He of the Black Fir, a *nom de guerre* which had grown into custom. Wrenne turned, nodding to him impatiently, his eyes wandering back again to the scene spread below him.

* Tsing-jin—Chinese name for themselves—Sons of the Great Purity reign.

Borne faintly upward from the mandarin's garden below the way was the sound of the lute played by a master hand, and the voice of a man singing. Wrenne recognized the words of the sage Lao-tseu.

By beauty of face and ravishing form
Come thoughts of a beautiful soul.
The world is deceived by the outwards of love
But——

"Come," said Hamilton Wrenne impatiently. Lao-tseu was an old croaker, even though a sage. Why had this pessimistic occupant of the mandarin's garden chosen to disturb his beautiful dream?

Below, he mounted his horse, which shied violently. From the dust of the road arose a black something, that flapped its wings and cawed dismally. Thsang's teeth showed in the half-light.

"An ill omen, illustrious one," he said. "An ill omen."

"Not for me," responded Wrenne, with a laugh that was gay enough to show the counsel of Lao-tseu to be of no effect. "For, look you, Thsang, am I not the envoy of the Black Fir and a bird of raven plumage myself? How know you that the bird is not the soul of my ancestor?"

Thsang made a wry face. "Not so, Black One.

For it was an evil bird, accursed by Gotama to feed upon offal and the carcasses of the dead. It is a sign of ill omen—see, it flies straight along our path. Its way means destruction, Hei-song-che-tsoo. Take the road of Kang-ing-pien to-night.”

“The black clerks are my friends, Thsang,” laughed Wrenne again, and touched his horse lightly with his spur.

The two made a medieval picture as the light showed them outlined against the white steps of a temple—the slender, graceful, black-avised man in the imperial yellow uniform, golden-frogged, his crucifix sword suspended from a jeweled belt by a golden cord, the peacock’s feather of his mandarin’s hat trailing out behind him—the picture of a goodly man on a goodly horse, whose whiteness contrasted with Wrenn’s hair and eyes; in his rear the Manchu, also in the imperial uniform, belted and booted, and uprearing his six feet three inches over a gray mare. And so they passed out of the light of the thoroughfare and into the street of the Little Purveyors of the Poor. It was a mean alley with unclean causeway, where were the shops patronized by coolies, undertakers, and those of the lowest orders. It was an unsavory district through which to pass, but Wrenne knew by long experience

that it was a rare Tsing-jin who would raise arms against one in the uniform of the Great Pure Kingdom.

"*Hiai!*" called Thsang suddenly, in warning. "Spur thy horse, illustrious one!"

Involuntarily and without asking reasons, Wrenne's spurs came in contact with his horse's flank, and the splendid animal upreared itself on its haunches, stared with dilated eyes, and plunged suddenly forward. Out of the darkness of the street came grasping hands that caught the bridle, and were near to taking it from Wrenne's grasp. Again the spurs bit into the white horse, and with frightened neighs and whinnies—for never was there a kinder man to his beast than Hamilton Wrenne—it galloped madly along the rough street, dragging two men who held tightly to the bridle, tearing its gums until it champed red foam. Wrenne's hand went to his sword, and the blade of the crucifix glinted out of the darkness. But that same moment a pair of yellow hands clutched his neck from behind. His feet slipped from the stirrups, and he went over backward. The owner of the yellow hands was undermost, and it was he whose head struck the stones of the street, sending him into unconsciousness and releasing his grip. Immediately Wrenne was on his feet, his eyes peering for his antagonists, his sword ready.

They came soon enough—the two who had caught the reins, and who had released them with the slipping of the American from his saddle. There was a pink puff, a little gray smoke, a sharp staccato of sound, and a bullet perilously close to Wrenne's shoulder, burning it. But by its light he had seen his antagonist and his sword slashed into human flesh, which quivered at the impact. A man with half-severed neck stumbled on his face into the roadway; another leaped into Wrenne's arms, sending the crucifix sword high into air.

Wrenne felt a sudden strangling, and a hotness overspread his skin. His antagonist's arm was crooked about his neck and his left fist was pounding the pit of his stomach. He grew curiously sick and ill, almost vomiting. Remembrance of his plight came in his violent twist, which freed him and sent the sword-point in the direction of this foul fighter. Only a laugh of derision and an attack from the back; a knee in the small; both hands about the gullet. Wrenne lashed out viciously with his spurred heels, and the grip grew weaker. The laugh changed to a cry of pain. He whirled upon his antagonist, his sword descending upon his unprotected head, splitting it cleanly through. But even as the blood spurted about the blue steel,

something heavy struck the back of the American's head, and he went down into the unclean street.

Immediately someone knelt over his body, and a tiny electric torch showed a gleam as the kneeling one tore open the embroidered collar of the coat, the linen one underneath, the cambric shirt, the gauze undergarment. In the light of the torch was a square, silver box, suspended by a silver chain next the skin. The searcher could not find the catch. He pulled at it with eager fingers until the blood came leaping up from the white skin, where the links of the chain cut it—then at a weak place they snapped. The silver box was stowed away and the electric torch went out.

"Cooe-cooe!"

The ravisher of the chain whistled shrilly. The man with whom Thsang was at grips suddenly released himself, and fled up the street fleetly, following the one who had dragged Wrenne from his horse, who had been stunned, and who had come to life again in time to rifle the American of his dearest possession.

Thsang, weak from several wounds, kicked the body of the first assailant whom he had killed, and followed swiftly after the one who had escaped. But remembering, he halted, struck a match, and lighted a torch which he carried at his belt. It was more important that he should find the Black One, his colonel. And he

found him with crushed head and matted hair, his neck bleeding where he had been despoiled.

Raging, the Manchu sheathed his colonel's sword, when he had made sure that the other two assailants were dead. Then, raising Wrenne's body in his arms, he staggered along the street of the Little Purveyors to the Poor, slipping and stumbling among the refuse until he emerged upon the street of the legations. The American legation was close by. He let the unconscious body slip to its feet, while he knocked upon the gate with his free hand and slipped back in the protection of one of the stone dogs of Fo, two of which guarded the gate.

An American soldier, on guard, swung open the gate, and eyed the bloody figures suspiciously. Thsang, who knew pidgin-English, addressed him:

"You savy my Melican mandalin all-same—all-same you call Lenne——"

"Gwan, Chink!" growled the upholder of American militarism. "Whatcher giving me, anyhow?"

And Thsang, very weak from loss of blood, lost his bland imperturbability, screaming insult in his own language at the soldier, who listened, highly amused.

"You no savy 'Melican soldier—officer—take look-see."

The American peered cautiously from behind the

bars, and caught a glimpse of the white face, lifeless, in the starlight. Immediately the gate clicked open, and the American and Chinese carried the body within.

"It's Black Wrenne."

The American soldier locked the gate and called shrilly to the legation servants:

"Here, you boys, make qui-qui now damn' pronto; you hear. Qui-qui."

Sad was the plight of Captain Komoto when he, by devious ways, at last crept into the burrow of Kitsunesan. He was in dirty Chinese garments, rent and torn and stained with blood, his hands lacerated, his fingernails broken to the quick. The back of his head was an unlovely plaster of sticky hair; he carried one hand limp, for the wrist was broken. And it was in this condition that he gained access to the cabinet where Gray Fox and Ito Ugichi sat smoking over their *hibachis*, and awaiting his return.

They noted the plight of him without surprise. They had not expected that their object be attained without serious hurt to those who wished to compass it.

Komoto saluted them.

"The gods have guarded you, Komoto," grinned Ugichi.

"Little guard, Excellency," answered the soldier. "Little guard. I am a mass of broken bones and torn flesh; good for little duty for a month of moons. He was no weakling, Excellencies."

"Had he been, 'twould have been unnecessary to put upon his seeking the Captain Komoto," returned Gray Fox. He peered at the soldier with ill-concealed impatience. "Has Kwannon been thy friend, Komoto-san!"

For answer, the addressed one drew from within his torn garments a square silver box, to which was attached a stained and broken chain.

"This I took from the neck of the *Ijin-san*," he replied, without emotion. "The chain is broken. That I could not avoid, for I hasted."

"For this a *kanjo*, Komoto," cried Ugichi, and his eyes sparkled. "A *kanjo* for thee, Komoto. The golden kite shall be written upon thy breast, illustrious son of thy father."

He took the box from the table, repressing his eagerness, and turning it over and over in his fingers. He saw no opening, fastening, or catch, and handed it to Gray Fox.

"Thou art familiar with the cunning devices of the silversmiths," he said. "Do thou find the concealed spring!"

Kitsune fondled the box lovingly. In the silence that followed he sought with pressing thumb for the spring, finding it finally as the center of the flower's petals. It flew immediately open.

Ugichi and Komoto stood tense, watching him as he gazed at the open box. They saw first surprise, then incredulity, then anger as he hastily felt with thumb pressed against the interior. Abruptly he threw the box upon a low table, and arose to confront the two.

"That was what he wore about his neck—this Black Wrenne!"

Komoto bowed low. "Yes, Excellency."

"You have done well; go!"

Komoto went out. Ugichi and Kitsune faced each the other.

"Thou—the cunning and the subtle one; thou on whose information two soldiers of Japan have lost their lives; upon which I have builded false hopes—look what was within the silver box that hung about the neck of this *Ijin-san*, the Black Wrenne!"

Count Ito Ugichi picked up the box, and saw it to be but a frame for a small miniature of the face of Miss Elizabeth Courtney, whose eyes met his as he gazed at the painted reflection.

CHAPTER V

A QUESTION OF ETHICAL RIGHT—AND WRONG

BESS was never to know that her gift to Hamilton Wrenne had been the cause of the attack made upon him. It was true, as Ito Ugichi had said, that while in Shanghai she had the keys to the Dragon door enclosed in a silver box, and swung by a chain; true, also, that she had given such another silver box to Wrenne, but without thought of exposing him to danger. She had admired the workmanship of the key-box, and had sent a messenger to the silver-smith's to have it duplicated. Wrenne had for a long time begged for a portrait of herself, and in odd moments aboard ship she had painted a miniature. This she fastened within the silver box and in the dining-room of the Hotel Astor, in Shanghai, had publicly given it to Wrenne. And so, all unwittingly, she had put Ugichi on a false scent.

She was further unaware of the fact that any knew of her possession of the Double-Dragon keys, save only her brother Austin. There had been no hint of

foul play in the death of Gordon Lee—she had not given the matter thought. Lee had complained, at their last meeting, of a weakness of the heart. This she naturally imagined had brought about his death. The various attempts of agents to secure the keys she put down only to petty thieves, and after leaving Shanghai she had carried the silver box in a chatelaine-bag fastened to her waist, because she found the weight of the chain was leaving a mark upon her neck.

But, although she did not know herself to be the innocent cause, she was aware of the fact that the attack upon Wrenne had materially changed their plans. In the solitude of the night after Wrenne left her, she had finally determined not to use the Dragon keys—not to attempt to pilfer the diamonds in the temple. She knew that in that act she was forgetting her duty to her aunts, going back on her word; but she loved Wrenne too much to take any chances of losing that love. The picture was to be finished the following week. She and Wrenne would quit Peking together and go back with him to help her. She would always be in possession of enough money to keep her aunts from want—and she would not need to steal for them.

It was after his leaving her that night and too happy to sleep, that while wandering in the gardens of the Invisible Deity she discovered a knot-hole level

with her eyes in the trunk of an old chu-sah-ki tree. It seemed an ideal hiding place for the keys. Probing within, finding it less than a foot deep, she unfastened the keys from the chain about her waist and dropped them within.

Her plan of leaving them there forever might very well have been carried out, fresh with the impulse of the moment; her decision might even have lasted a week while the first ecstasy of love endured. However, it happened that Hamilton Wrenne lay on a sick-bed for more than a month battling for his life, concussion of the brain having developed from the crashing blow he had received.

During this time work on the portrait was suspended, and Bess hovered about the sick-room in the character of nurse, wasting herself thin in her anxiety for the man she loved. And during this time she reflected over the situation, and decided that, after all, it would be wisest to take the diamonds. When Hamilton Wrenne quitted the Chinese service—what then? It might be that for the time it would be necessary for both of them to live on the proceeds of Bess' work, and she would not then be able to help Aunt Malvinia and Aunt Kitty at all. And Bess did not want to be poor again. She knew, entirely too well, that condition of hardly knowing how the expenses of the week

were to be managed. Neither would it do to have her mother and her little sisters (all of whom were almost dependent upon her) brought to the same straits.

Money was most necessary, and it was close to hand.

She recalled Austin's sophistry that she was robbing no one. The jewels were wasted there in the darkness. Only tradition kept the door closed. She was taking nothing from anyone who needed it—who would miss it. She was not robbing anyone in particular. The gems were not intended to be used even for display.

So the fine frenzy of her moral moment wore off in consideration of the practical things of life. There was only one thing to be considered. Hamilton must not know.

During his illness she had remained at the Hotel de l'Univers in the Tartar City where he had really acquired rooms, although he had a splendid suite in Prince Chu'un's yamen. Now that he was well again, she must return to the Winter Palace and finish the portrait. The first morning he was able to be about, a thin, wan shadow of himself, she said good-by for the time, and returned to her pavilion in the Gardens of the Invisible Deity. An audience with Kwang-Hsu resulted in the sittings being continued, and, after another week, during which she caught only

hurried glimpses of Wrenne by flying visits to the hotel, she had completed the portrait to the satisfaction of her royal patron. Levee was held, at which Chinese lords and ladies said many polite things about her work, and the picture was taken away to be framed.

It was on that night that she finally made her resolve to enter the temple of the Double-Dragon and secure the jewels.

Meanwhile she knew nothing of the position in which Wrenne had been placed during a month's lapse of time. Had he, in pursuance of his intention, quitted Peking at the end of the week he had set for himself, ostensibly to perfect some of the mechanism of the plan to seat Chu'un on the Great Purity throne, he would have been allowed to go without question. But the cogs of the plot had been revolving during his illness, and the carrying out of the plan was being deferred only until he could take an active hand in it. Chu'un had so long been a puppet that he was at a loss to decide, or give instructions, without Wrenne's assistance and advice.

And so it was that on the same night that Bess finally decided to abjure her moral principles for the sake of both sentiment and practicality, Black

Wrenne was summoned by Prince Chu'un to be present at the final meeting of the heads of the rebel party.

He argued the question with himself much in the same way that Bess had done. Just as it had been in her case, his rectitude was much more a thing of the moment than of endurance. He cared none the less for the girl. His love, had it been put to the test of choosing between her and his ambition, would, without doubt, have made little deliberation over the matter, and allowed the ambitious projects of the past to take the wind's way, while he clung to the girl.

All of which shows that all save certain essential morals are for the most part inspired by the moment, save only when they bring about the question of hurt to some loved one—which latter is really not morality, only a certain form of sentiment.

It is difficult to condone the moral obliquity of Bess and of Black Wrenne, but excuse is found in the fact that, while the drama of their lives had cast them to play the parts of hero and heroine, they still remained most indubitably human. And in the workaday world of to-day, where ambitious souls strive for recognition, power, and the luxuries, it is not easy to relinquish opportunities for all these things, where only a matter of ethics is concerned, and go out facing pov-

erty and obscurity without regrets for what might have been.

Wrenne was not altogether selfish in his deliberations on the matter any more than Bess had been. Her transgression of the moral code had only been made justifiable in her eyes when she considered the unhappiness that would be brought to a number of people by puritanic scruples. Black Wrenne was thinking as much of his sweetheart as of himself. He had no money and no prospects outside China. All his real life had been spent in the land of Tien-ha, and with cumulative effect. Remaining behind, he became a man in power—if all went well. Venturing forth, he was again only an obscure adventurer. And as an adventurer with only his sword to sell, would it be possible for him to engage in any foreign service where he would keep that sword clean? Morality was not expected of mercenaries—they were the tools of revolutionists, princes of the succession; intriguers, diplomatic agents. He went away to China to face uncertainty of income without the certainty of straight dealing.

Thus reasoning, when he had reduced Prince Chu'un's parchment to the flimsiest bits of rice paper, which he flung to the wind of mid-afternoon, he decided that he would not withdraw from the plot to

seat Chu'un on the throne of his fathers, but would take the reward of his years of waiting.

And so, on just such another beautiful night as the one when they had forsworn temptation each for the other's dear sake, when in the light of the good ancestors' lanterns they had spoken from their hearts, and with all the good that was in them—on just such another night as that both had come to the conclusion that beautiful sentiment and spotless love were for the starlight alone.

CHAPTER VI

THE PAGODA ON THE LAKE

LEAVING the water-front of Nagasaki and passing upwards to the hills beyond, one comes by circuitous and tortuous ways to a garden surrounded by dwarfed yews. Should the passing tourist wish to penetrate the mystery of this garden, he will receive no assistance from the 'rickshaw coolies, for, in their queer pidgin-English, they will gesticulate and point wildly to a number of erected columns, slim and covered with tracery, the center of which is a grotesque fox's head.

But in case of insistence on the part of the passing tourist, he may pass through the grove and find himself on the shore of a circular lake, in the center of which is an islet. A pagoda-ed temple rises from the beach of the islet; deserted in appearance, even with a certain sad solemnity.

One may descend to the level of the lake by means of stone steps. There is a single *sampan* to be found there with a boatman in a tight uniform of green and red with ideographs embroidered on his tunic. He

will accept no dole of *sen*, nor does a great round *yen*, or many of them, attract them. He will push off his boat from the shore, making elaborate gestures of dissent, and the passing tourist returns to his 'rickshaw and to the lower town or goes on to Moji, grumbling. If, while dining at the hotel, he asks one of the boys who serve him concerning the mysterious pagoda-ed temple on the lake, they will doubtless give him the information that it is very, very holy, not to be approached by inferior groundlings like themselves and there is an intimation that seems to include the passing tourist in the same category. Should he meet the American Consul and put the question, that gentleman will smile and give him practically the same information. Should the honorable gentleman forget to do this, he will doubtless have nothing but time to consider his indiscretion and some inferior port in one of the lesser banna republics to do his considering in.

It was therefore with some surprise that several days after Kitsune-San's disappointment at his discovery of what Wrenne had carried in the box about his neck that certain 'rickshaw boys noted a person of no distinction disregarding their frantic pointing at the traced poles. Alighting, he bade them in flawless Nipponese, to wait until he should return and to keep their distance meanwhile.

To all appearance, the person of no distinction was also a foreigner. Yet the *Ijin-san* passed to the shore, traced something in air for the benefit of the boatman, who gave him a mighty humble genuflection in return, and speedily transported him to the islet.

He seemed to know his way, disappearing into the temple and ascending to the pagoda whose door flew open at his knock.

The room he entered was wide and lofty, its furnishing both Oriental and European. Rich rugs, *kakaenonos*, dragon-lanterns, teak-wood furniture, hand-painted screens in delicate Japanese tones, had for companions wall-maps of French and English and German origin, a huge globe into which numberless pins with vari-colored heads were thrust, a shelf of encyclopaedias and other foreign reference works, telephone and telegraph instruments and even one of the newly invented wireless outfits.

At a huge rosewood desk, supplied with a number of push-bottons, sat a man in a blue-gray kimona and a red obi-sash. He greeted the stranger with a mere lifting of the eyebrows. His hand was waved ceremoniously to a seat nearby. The stranger put down his cockney-clerk top hat and stick. After bowing respectfully he was permitted to draw up his chair.

"You sent for me, Daimios?" he said.

The man in the blue-gray kimona frowned and bent the paper-cutter with which he had been toying until it snapped in his hand.

Tossing the broken bits of ivory away he turned his chilly eyes full upon the man in the tightly fitting suit of Austrian-made clothes.

"There are no Daimios nowadays," he said harshly. "You will gain nothing by crude flattery, Sugiyama. You will observe that I do not address you as an equal."

The other nodded.

"You will remember not to forget that you are a mongrel. And of Eta class. You are offended?"

Upon the visitor's face there was no change from his usual inconsequential stare.

"I do you no wrong, Sugiyama," continued the man in the blue-gray kimona—"and for that reason I have made most minute inquiry into your history. You are the son of a Geisha of the Golden Kite tea-house, who married a foreign sailor of low degree who was killed in Yokohama three weeks after his marriage in a foreign gambling house. Your mother returned to her singing and dancing and so continued to her death, fifteen years later. She danced and sang many times before the Emperor."

Both bowed profoundly.

"A most estimable woman who educated her son in a manner befitting one of higher rank. It was thus possible for you, Sugiyama, to obtain a commission in the army, for rank is of no consideration when the Emperor must be served. Your merit none will deny. Your courage in the Russian War proved a fortunate accident inducing Hayashi to transfer you to the lower order of the silent. I have long considered you as one well suited to do those dishonorable deeds a Samurai may not stoop to do. For unless I much mistake you, Sugiyama, you have no desire to write your name in the *Bushi-kanjo*. Your service is that of a mercenary. Although your rearing is Nipponese, your face shows no trace of your mother, only of your father. And that he was a person of no nobility of character that face amply proves. I doubt that your heart is set on aught but gain, Sugiyama, but in things not too great—you——"

Sugiyama had taken from his pocket his handkerchief and was slowly and carefully pleating it in the fashion of a garment.

"Ito Ugichi is as you may know—in China. You will now be told how also the plan he has laid for gaining certain great hidden wealth has come to nothing through the foreigner, Wrenne!"

He told him briefly of the adventures of Captain

Komoto in his attempt to gain the Golden Kite. He then laid stress upon Japan's pressing financial need, her customs mortgaged to England, her debts to America: the fact that, adequately to consummate their Chinese plans, more money was needed than Japan was able to find. He then continued:

"We had originally planned that the Emperor should be made away with during the revolt that was to be led in the name of Chu'un. Once the revolution was an assured success—in his name—Ito Ugichi was to secretly make away with Chu'un, leaving the Reformers without any leader. Ito Ugichi was then to suggest a Nipponese protectorate during the time that a leader was chosen. And once he held the reins—it would be as it was in Korea and in Manchuria."

Both men permitted themselves a smile.

"Only four things stand in our way. First, lack of money to pay the Germans for the arms and munitions that lay in the great arsenals at Wei'-Hai-Wei. The second is this man Wrenne, the American who stands high in Reformer Councils and who has steadily opposed any suggestion that Kwang-Hsu be removed. But he must die if we are to triumph in China. This Wrenne's plan is that Kwang-Hsu be deposed after the revolution and be given his choice between being kept a prisoner and abdication. He is our third obstacle—this

weakling Emperor. The aristocratic Red Girdle and White Banner families will never permit his abdication in favor of Chu-un who favors the foreigner. Which he will surely consent to do now that he has been separated from the She-Devil. So he must die."

"Separated? Will the Honorable One explain?" For the first time Sugiyama's passive face showed emotion; that of astonishment.

"The Dowager-Empress separated from the Emperor? She who has ruled China so long in his name?"

The old Samurai nodded. "It is indeed astounding, Sugiyama. But Yuan-shi-Kai's power has increased over the Emperor, that of Tze-Hsi has declined. And it was Yuan himself that saw to her banishment to the summer palace at Wan-hou-San. She is our fourth obstacle. There, in murderous rage, she plans with P'i-Hsias-li for her restoration, the death of Kwang-hsu and Chu'un too, and the elevation of her fourth nephew to the position of Emperor."

"Plots, indeed, Honorable One," commented Sugiyama, his ordinarily dull eyes sparkling. For it was in such an atmosphere that he was at his best, and the old Samurai knew it.

"Aye, plots indeed—fires smolder in Peking as they did seven years since when the Brothers of the

Harmonious Fists fanned their flames to consume all foreigners. As you know, the Dowager was the chief adviser, and money from the Royal Treasury went to pay for their revolt. The scattered remains of the Boxer Brotherhood are now drawing close again, to serve the Barren She-Wolf in the elevation of Tuan. It is to our advantage that such a revolt should begin, and you are to aid the Dowager's plans wherever and whenever possible and endeavor to put an end to this dangerous fellow, Wrenne, who advises the Reformers not to make away with the Emperor. The Dowager's revolt is to begin with the assassination of the Emperor. Once this has happened, you, with your inside information will betray the Dowager's forces to the Reformers, who will attend to their wholesale executions.

"Thus the Dowager's hand removes the Emperor and the Reformers have their long wished for excuse for sending the bow-string to the She-Wolf and her puppet, Tuan. Two of the obstacles to Nipponese supremacy in China are thus removed at one blow."

"But how am I, Honorable, to become party to their secret plans?"

"By going to her, Sugiyama, as the secretary and confidant of the late Li-Wung-Ki, who carried away the keys to The Doors of the Double-Dragon."

Swiftly the old Samurai told Sugiyama the tale of Li, his flight from China, his life in the Courtney home, his recognition by Chu'un, of his death and the letter that left the girl his heir and the guardian of the keys; of the failure of Captain Komoto to capture what he had believed to be the keys; of the affair between Bess Courtney and Hamilton Wrenne.

"And so," he finished, "finally Kitsune-san admitting himself baffled for once, sent me a message in code calling for aid. He told me that the girl's quarters in the Forbidden City have been many times searched. Unknown to her she had been skillfully drugged by her own attendants to whom we paid a great price, and her person was searched by women while she slept. But the keys were not to be found. Then it was I thought of a different way. Had she left the keys in America?"

He paused; his face stern.

"It was no work for one of Samurai blood, so I appointed another like yourself, Sugiyama. One of our spies in Washington employed criminals to enter the girl's house at night. But still the keys were not found. Almost in despair I wired that he should inquire as to the girl's kinsfolk hoping for an unworthy one. Such a one was found—her brother. He knew of the great treasure and was angry because she would not share it with him. But she refused, and

lest he steal them she took the keys with her. They are in China. And so they must be found. There is still a way. And it is a way that will at once rid us of the two remaining obstacles. The keys will give us the treasure—the money we so sorely need. And it will rid us of this Black Wrenne.”

Another hour was consumed before Sugiyama had been told. Then he arose:

“The woman who will assist you you will know by a sign that I will now give you,” said the old Chief.

He had opened a drawer while he spoke and taken therefrom a small sandal-wood box. Opening this he discovered a glittering thing that flashed as it lay in the palm of his hand. Sugiyama, on the other’s motion to inspect it, leaned over and saw it to be a bit of jewelry made in the form of a brooch, with some forty small diamonds paved upon a platinum back in the form of a parrot, its head high, its tail extended, and two chip emeralds for eyes.

“Wear that,” said the old Chief, “pinned into the corner of your lower lefthand waistcoat pocket; and unless a man who addresses you as a brother agent, whether he is Japanese or not, can show such a pin in the same place, have no converse with him. These letters . . .” he handed him a small sheaf of them secured with a rubber-band—“will present you to

those of the Dowager's court who have her confidence. Is there more that I can say."

With a low genuflection and many humilifics, Sugiyama took the ornament and the letters and went backwards from the room.

BOOK THE THIRD

CHAPTER I

THREE GOLDEN ARROWS

AND so at last we come to the night of *Hoa-tchao* —The Birthday of a Hundred Flowers—the night when both Wrenne and Bess decided they had suffered from too much starlight. There were stars enough this night in all conscience to have lighted every city in China and that without the aid of the spring moon that sailed a serene silver censer, through a cloudless sky.

In the streets of the Three Cities men and women in gala dress called upon the flower goddess, Kwan-Yin; flying illumined kites the shapes of the lily and the lotus, and flinging garlands of blooms in air. Paper lanterns—green, red, yellow, multicolored—bobbed about in a fashion so crowded that one regarding the festival from an elevation surmised a frolic of prismatic glow-worms. The air was redolent of apple sprays and orange-blossoms. Out of the uproar one caught many indistinct notes—the tinkle of a stringed instrument, the strain of a song, the laugh of a woman.

Peking was very gay and future-careless that night.

A certain mansion, saw-tooth walled and iron-gated, and overlooking the Street of the Maimed Linnet, claimed attention through its lack of lights and festivity. Maskers passing spoke among themselves concerning it, their remarks to the effect that the mighty merchant, Hao-Khieou, was absent with family and servants, matters of business detaining him in Tien-tsin. Else there would have been mighty rejoicing among the poor, for upon such festivals Hao was wont to throw open his gates and have spread within his gardens a feast of roasted meats and candied confections; and any man, even the veriest coolie, might have his fill, blessing the spring-moon and Hao-Khieou in the same greedy breath. Those who had come this night so hoping went away with the gnawing disappointment of unfilled stomachs, but with no word of blame for Hao-Khieou. For the poor knew him as their friend, this merchant who had sacrificed a year's profits to feed his hungry brethren in famine time.

It was true enough that Hao-Khieou's family and servants were in Tien-tsin. But behind the closed shutters and the drawn blinds, lanterns and candles gleamed in the concourse hall of the dark house, and Hao-Khieou sat, engaged in weighty convention with other men of import. The soft rugs on the polished

floors were the seats of fifty people of excellent accomplishment, bearing names revered the length and breadth of the Yellow Kingdom—scholars of the universities who had attained much merit; Manchu generalissimos; two Tartar princes, brothers of the blood; many Mongolian mandarins; the viceroys of four provinces, and the *taotais* of a score of cities; mandarins of the yellow banner, henchmen of the royal house; mandarins of the white banner, their equals in race, only little inferior in power—these the thinkers, schemers, controllers of cities, provinces, and principalities.

Lacking, perhaps, somewhat of the brains and the power, but balancing the score by holding the strings of the money-bags, were the grave merchant princes; and of these Hao-Khieou was the chief.

Two foreigners completed the assembly. The first, Hamilton Wrenne, pale after his illness, but very magnificent in his imperial vestments, his cloak slashed with imperial yellow silk, thrown over one shoulder, his right hand resting on his golden-hilted sword. He sat on the right of Hao-Khieou. The other foreigner, Ito Ugichi, on his left.

There had been much speech-making, much adulative rhetoric in speaking of one another, much veiled simile in referring to their reasons for being present

in the darkened house of Hao-Khieou; but the metaphor was dropping away as the climax approached, and now they spoke almost baldly.

It was the first time that the heads of the party had been gathered together en masse. The plan had been perfected by working it out in segments. This was the work of Hamilton Wrenne and the Manchu general, Tchín—for Wrenne the planning and segregation, for Tchín the confidence gained to carry on the work. It had been to bring out a general uprising in northern China that these men had striven to make the upper provinces theirs, and most particularly that of Cheh-li. With the majority of the Manchus on their side, the subjugation of the lower provinces would not be difficult. They were ever slaves under the yoke, and it would be no great task to compel them to accept as emperor whoever sat upon the throne in Peking.

According to the Manchus, there was no rebellion in what they intended to do. Chu'un was Kwang-Hsu's brother, and as much entitled to the throne as the puppet of Tze-Hsi. Neither of the two royal brothers was the son of the late monarch, but merely a nephew. When Hsien-Feng died at Jehol, his son, Tung-Chih, had been nominally emperor, with Tze-Hsi, his mother, as regent. But Tung-Chih had died after only two years' actual reign, and Hsien-Feng

having left no further issue, the successor was chosen from among his nephews. Kwang-Hsu was chosen, his enemies stated, because he was the weakest-willed of the royal princes; and the empress-dowager had seen in him one through whom she could rule absolutely, as she had done.

They were bitter men who sat in the house of Hao-Khieou; men who had seen their country the despised of all nations during Tze-Hsi's domination—defeated ignominiously by Japan; saved from the Taipings only by European interventions; helpless before the mob rule of the Boxers, and the entrance of their sacred city by heavy-handed foreign troops, who cast down their gods and profaned their most revered customs. During Tze-Hsi's quasi-reign, China had been made a mock by Japan, bullied by Russia, insulted by the Anglo-Saxon races, and stolen from by all nations. It was a sore thing this, to these men who loved the land of Tien-Ha.

They were the reformers; nothing more. They saw in Prince Chu'un a gentle-minded prince of European education, who was acceptable to the people because of his ancestry; and to them, the conspirators, because of his foreign training and his desire for progression. They would have little active interference from him. He would do as he was asked, and make little bother

over it. All he desired was the title of emperor of all the Chinas. But with his accession, the monuments of greed and imposition which had endured for centuries would go tumbling down; the modern methods would be adopted, and China put in a position to defend herself from the encroachments of foreign foes.

It was true that they had been forced to seek help from Japan in order to carry out their great project. In no other way was it possible for them to obtain the arms and ammunition they needed for their work. Also they needed the assistance of some regiments of Japanese soldiers, in order to inspire their own fighters. Japan was necessary to them, but they had no intention of yielding themselves to the dictation of the pygmy yellow nation, who, in their secret hearts, they despised as mere imitators.

Yet no echo of these sentiments had Ito Ugichi heard. Secret as he was, he had underrated the Chinese after the fashion of his race. Though Japan could work and wait, China could work harder and wait longer. Though Japan had a great secretness, the secretness of China was vast; and these nobles and scholars of the Yellow Kingdom, knowing that those of Japan had imagined themselves China's preceptors and mentors, allowed the fallacy to assume proportions by fanning it with the wind of words. Ito Ugichi,

Gray Fox, and others who served the mikado, looked upon the anticipated triumph of the rebels as the giving over of China to them. The rebels themselves saw in it nothing for Japan. They meant to promise everything, to give as little as possible.

As for Hamilton Wrenne, the only European in the plot, they had had him so long among them that the color of his skin was not a deterrent. He was of all the most necessary, after Chu'un, a reincarnation of "Chinese Gordon" to them. He it was who was able to lead Chinese soldiers to victory—he who had put down brigandage and minor rebellions with handfuls of troops; who was able to turn a thousand coolies into a well-ordered regiment of automatons in little time; who possessed the confidence of soldiers and officers alike, and whom almost every man in the army would follow unquestioningly wherever he led.

This was the climax of over two years of burrowing under the imperial edifice; this night when the Birthday of a Hundred Flowers was being celebrated in streets and palaces alike; the night when the first blow was to be struck for Chu'un and progress.

Prince Chu'un was not present at the gathering. It was unwise for a prince of the blood to leave the violet city at night and journey to a darkened house in the Tartar city. The empress-dowager had many spies in

her employ; there were too many private informers in the persons of palace courtiers and retainers who would not be tardy in following up such a departure from the usual. But it was understood that Hamilton Wrenne represented the prince in person, and it was to him that the closing address of Hao-Khieou was made.

"The moment is at hand, Black One," he said, as he approached the culmination of his peroration. "Outside the walls of the Chinese city are a thousand soldiers in the garb of coolies, having concealed nearly arms and munitions of war. These men, I understand from the most illustrious Tchin, though scattered, are but waiting the signal to form and enter the city by the imperial catacombs, a plan of which has been furnished their colonel by you, procured from the exalted brother of the Son of Heaven. Within the city walls are another fifty score, scattered through these two cities, and in command of the worthy Yamachi, of the mikado's service. These, too, but wait the signal. The brothers of the blood in the service of the Yellow Dragon—soldiers whom thou hast trained thyself, envoy of the Black Fir—have been apprised of the situation, and they also wait for the time to strike. They are upon the walls of all three cities; even within the imperial palaces themselves. And they look upon

thee, envoy of the Black Fir, as their leader, whose word is command. They will be faithful—you have promised that.”

“I have promised, and so it shall be,” answered Wrenne, rising.

There was a subdued sound of approving voices.

“Then”—and Hao-Khieou flung his hands outward—“why do we delay when all is ready? Procrastination is like strong wine to drug the soul of action. To-night close upon three thousand men, trained soldiers, wait the commands of the august Chu’un. The fires lighted at Peking will spread through all Cheh-li and to-morrow the province will be ours. Hupeh and Honan are promised; all others will follow. And to-night, when the whole of Tien-ha is drunk with the spirits of the Birthday of a Thousand Flowers—to-night is the time to fling to the wind the banner of revolt—the revolt against the cruelty, the blood-lust, the covetousness of the hated Tze-Hsi, who, though she be the mother of a thousand emperors, is a menace to the land of our fathers. If China is to be preserved intact, we must be bound by other chains than those of fear and hatred. And so I say to-night!”

Again the hoarse murmur of approval.

“Before my humble dwelling was honored by thy feet across the threshold, Black-plumed One, there had

been agreed among us that to-night there should go up from the walls of the violet city a signal of revolt. Well we knew that Prince Chu'un was undecided, waiting thy recovery. We knew better still that he flinches at the thought of the first blow—but to-night he must decide. Go, therefore, to him, Black Wrenne, taking in your hand these arrows of the night."

He gave to Wrenne a packet containing what appeared to be three rounded sticks.

"Tell him that you have come for his approval. That close upon three thousand men but await the rending of the night by these arrows of flame to arise up, casting down the old régime for a new. Until he has spoken, there will be taken no action; but if he permits this night to pass without the blow being struck, he will hardly chance upon a better one, though he wait for a thousand *Siu-fantis*. Meanwhile those among us will go forth among the armed men who are waiting, inform them that when three golden arrows show against the black wings of the night angel all will enter the violet city, taking the forts in the name of Prince Chu'un, and aiding in securing the persons of the weakling, Kwang-Hsu, and his aunt, the accursed Tze-Hsi. To thee, then, is given the command of all the armies of the new order of things, thou who knowest so well the modern battling of arms. The

night is thine, Black Wrenne—thine and the prince's. Farewell. We await his decision. If he hath approval, loose, then, the flaming rockets, and to-morrow's sun will rise upon a new emperor of the Chinas."

All were upon their feet; all bowed low before Wrenne. He, a trifle dazed, thrust the rockets into his sword-belt, and threw his cape of imperial yellow over his shoulder. As he neared the door he drew his sword.

"I will be faithful," he said, following the form of the conspirators, and held the sword in salute.

"I will succeed," he added, and presented the sword at point.

"Or——"

And this time the sword-point covered his heart. With their subdued cheering, he shot the blade into its sheath, turned, and went swiftly from the room.

CHAPTER II

WITHIN THE DRAGON-GUARDED TEMPLE

IT was just ten o'clock when Bess Courtney pressed one of the window-catches, threw open the window, and stepped out on the marble pavilion of the Arbor of Buddha's Hand. The little Sèvres clock on its porcelain bracket was chiming out the last stroke of the hour as she closed the window behind her. She faced the Gardens of the Invisible Deity, a trembling, wan-faced, white-lipped girl.

There was a flood of moonlight on the lotus-covered lake, on the temple's golden roofs, on the hundred white steps leading to its doors. The gray-pink walls were illumined by it, the cedars and cypresses threw their long, languishing shadows across the beds of asters and peonies. As Bess descended from the terrace to the ground, a spray of white blossoms dropped from a *shu-sha-kih* tree, and she gave a little cry of fright, shrinking back against the terrace. Seeing the cause of her fright in the creamy blossoms, she forced a smile, and crept, a little gray-cloaked sprite, along

the graveled walks skirting the lake, and coming to the foot of the temple's steps—a short journey in itself, but to her interminable, fraught as it was with fears of watchers lurking behind trees and walls; even some indefinite, superstitious dread of ghostly wraiths of Chinese who looked to resent her profanation of sacred things.

At the foot of the steps she hesitated, crowding close to the little outbuilding, her feet tapping nervously on the marble blocks. After all, what had she to fear? The temple had been locked for many years. Back in her pavilion, her servants had retired to the servitors' quarters of the palaces. The gate to the southern archway, through which the emperor was wont to enter, was locked; the key to the northern one was in the possession of Hamilton Wrenne.

Wrenne! She shuddered at the thought that he might enter the gardens. But no! It was too late! That was not likely, his entrance.

She nerved herself to the ascent, clutching the keys in one hand. Tentatively she put her foot on the first marble step, then drew it back quickly. Almost weeping with shame for her cowardice, she spurred herself on to a sudden ascent of ten steps without looking back. But, weak and hesitating, her eyes were no longer to be kept to the front, but went around with a

sudden turning of her head. She paused, stiff with fright. A broad black bulk lay directly back of her on the steps. Her eyes dilated when she remembered there had been nothing there as she ascended. Her horrified gaze had espied a certain human shape to the black thing.

And, as she realized, she laughed hysterically. Afraid of her shadow! How many times had she heard that used as a term of reproach for other women! No one would have imagined it fitting for Bess Courtney. Yet that had been what had frightened her—her shadow!

The impetus of her laughter carried her up several score steps. Looking back cautiously, she saw only the gardens white in the moonlight; the lake shining, the lotus resting serenely on its surface; the blossoms of the mandarin oranges waving gently in a spring breeze. She continued her ascent.

Now she faced the iron doors of the temple itself. A very terrifying dragon sprawled across them—a two-headed, green-scaled thing with staring eyes of clear jade. Those eyes seemed omnipresent and most diabolically alive. So saturated had she become with Chinese beliefs, that she could for the moment imagine this painted presentment to be animated by the spirit of some dead priest, who had served his allotted life-

time as a tender of the shrine. The dragon appeared more than a mere symbol—more a very real, very inhuman protector of the great treasure that lay behind the entrance it guarded.

She was forced to master herself again before she drew up her hand and inserted the iron key in the door. She turned it to the right without effect; to the left with the same result; and imagined the jade eyes grinning at her. But she had come too far now to be bested by difficulties. They made the task easier for her, taking from her mind the weight of the supernatural. She knew that this iron key *must* fit the door, and threw the whole weight of her body against the fingers that held it. It turned with a loud, crawly screech, very akin to Bess' remembrance of a refractory slate-pencil scratching against a slate. But the physical revulsion that it caused saved her the mental shock, and, pushing her right shoulder against the door, she found it swinging gently backward.

She entered, turning on the pocket electric *arc* with which she had provided herself in anticipation before leaving Washington. It showed another door, and the blood-chilling spectacle of two enormous red eyes glaring into hers. Her affright was so intense that she made neither sound nor movement; and again she had the privilege of laughing at her fears.

There was barely space enough for three people to stand between the first door and the second one. Bess' arc had disclosed the second to be of burnished copper, with a dragon painted across it with red pigments, its eyes four enormous rubies. She pushed the first door shut, and unlocked the second one after some difficulty, revealing a third shining in its white exterior; the familiar dragon this time silver-scaled, and with diamond eyes, the size of which brought the girl to sudden realization of the enormous value of the treasure she was seeking—these diamonds alone would almost cover Austin's defalcations.

The fourth door was painted yellow and had a golden dragon with topaz eyes. That pushed behind her, she stood within the temple itself, the dust of unswept years in her nostrils; a coughing, sneezing, frightened girl in the most sacred precinct of the Forbidden City—The Temple of the Seven Thousand Eyes of Buddha.

With the dust out of her eyes, she saw that she was within a rotunda, the walls of which were composed of intensely yellow tiles, each tile forming a niche for a statue of the squatting, arm-folded presentment of Buddha. The images seemed uncountable. She saw them rising in tiers from every curve of the rotunda, all duplicates, and all of yellow porcelain. In the cen-

ter, a raised throne served as seat for a great golden Buddha—a hundred fold augmentation of those in the niches. When the girl's light fell upon the huge image, she drew back, amazed.

She had seen many of these Buddha images, but this was by far the most beautiful. The folds of the garments, the shape of the hands, the minute accuracy of face and figure, even the formation of the finger-nails, with the two guards to each hand—these had been executed in such a way as to wring envious admiration from her artist's soul. Richly wrought vases of enamel at the Buddha's feet held jeweled flowers. Tall golden candlesticks studded with pearls and rubies were on either side of it. The upper part of the throne was hung with a frieze of red-and-gold-clothed saints.

Yet for all the exquisite workmanship, there was no semblance of life in the face of the golden image. Bess, not understanding, came to the foot of the throne, her footsteps attended by clouds of dust from the silken rug of imperial yellow on which Buddha's priests had been wont to kneel. Observing closely, she saw the reason for the lack of expression in the face. The golden Buddha was blind.

Then it was that she turned her light upon the small images in the niches. They, too, lacked the semblance of eyes. She smiled slightly when she saw how

patiently the symbolic term had been carried out. All of the Buddhas were blind. No doubt there were three thousand five hundred of them to represent the seven thousand eyes, spoken of in the metaphor. The thing appalled Bess with the thought of the amount of patience necessary to carry out such a whim of fancy.

It was now for her to find the eyes of all these sightless Buddhas—the treasure that had haunted her for the many months that had passed since Gordon Lee gave her the keys to the Double-Dragon doors. She flashed the light about, but saw no boxes or receptacles of any kind. Momentarily she imagined she had not seen aright, so paced the entire curve of the rotunda. It was quite true. There was nothing that appeared to contain treasure of any kind—only the tiled walls, with their array of inperturbable images and the great throne in the center.

She sat down heavily on the lower step of the throne. No doubt the jewels were hidden in some secret room which required a knowledge of hidden springs. Tears came into her eyes. She had risked all, sacrificed scruples, taken chances of losing Wrenne—for this! Her clenched hand came down heavily on the step. The resultant sound caused her to sit suddenly erect.

It had been hollow, quite hollow, the ring of her

hand against the red lacquer of the throne. She sprang up. Yes, there was a chance. The steps of the throne projected slightly over their support. She reached down, caught the edge, pulled it upward, and drew back, dazzled at the lights that shone in her eyes.

There lay the jewels protected from prying eyes, and the touch of desecrating hands—at Buddha's feet, indeed. For each step was but a box within which the jewels lay.

She threw open one after another. They were shallow, lengthy boxes, lined with imperial yellow silk, the customary dragon ornamenting it. She put out her hand, touching the glorious gems, letting them slip through her fingers, while she held her breath at the beauty of them—living pieces of light that sparkled and scintillated before her—blue diamonds, yellow diamonds, white diamonds. And this wealth lay in touch of her hands.

When she came out of her gasping stage, she acted swiftly. A silver-mesh chatelaine-bag hung at her waist—a large bag which she had found useful when she went shopping, for it would hold pocketbook, toilet requisites, and any small articles she might purchase. She unhooked it from her belt, and with eager hands scooped up the gems between her white fingers, cramming them into the bag until it was barely possible to

close it. She had no idea of the value of the wealth she had taken, imagining it to be, perhaps, double the amount that Austin needed to repay her aunts. She did not realize it quadrupled that sum, and gave a large balance besides.

Now that she had actually done the thing, she looked about apprehensively, with the haunted gaze of the evil-doer. She closed the throne steps, and went hastily to the doors, finding some difficulty in shutting and locking them securely. Finally it was done, and she found herself without the temple and making frantic efforts to close the last door—the iron one. The blood rushed to her head; her whole body was strained. The door was gradually closing.

She paused to take further breath, turning as she did to view the moon-lighted gardens. And then she stood back, wild-eyed, numb, choking back a scream in her throat, one hand extended flat against the green-scaled Double-Dragon.

A man stood at the foot of the steps and gazed upward at her.

CHAPTER III

CLASH OF STEEL IN CANDLE-LIGHT

WRENNE left the house of Hao-Khieou by a rear entrance, a door in the garden wall which had its outlet into a narrow alley. He wormed himself along this, close to the wall, until he emerged upon the street of the Maimed Linnet, where his orderly, Thsang, walked two horses up and down the causeway, awaiting the return of his master. The varicolored lanterns bobbed to and fro in the street, but the sight of Thsang's imperial uniform kept an open space always before him. As Wrenne joined him, a pretty sing-song girl, bedecked with flowers and jewels, and leaning from a palanquin borne by two coolies, flung a garland of asters about his neck, and invited him with sparkling eyes. He doffed his plumed mandarin hat in mock respect, and the girl, catching sight of the peacock-plume, shrank back in affright, closing the curtains.

As he mounted his horse and rode away toward the violet city, Wrenne did not see the figure of Ito

Ugichi, wrapped in a heavy cloak of tan serge, emerge from the same alley, and stand looking after the two as they rode down the street of the Maimed Linnet. In the shelter of a compound farther up this same street, Ugichi got upon a horse also, and turned its head in the direction Wrenne had taken. By pursuing divers short cuts through mean streets and dark alleys, he came to the imperial city gate before Wrenne and his orderly. He was admitted by the parchment of Prince Chu'un which he carried always with him, and left his horse to be cared for by the gate soldiers while he went his way toward the prince's palace.

Wrenne arrived at the gate a little later, and the officer of the guard told him of the admittance of the stranger who bore Prince Chu'un parchment. It had been impossible to recognize Ugichi. His cloak muffled both face and form, and the officer had no reason to believe him other than Chinese, for the greetings had been made in the Mandarin tongue. Moreover, the Japanese count had fastened to his head a cue, which had dangled in full sight from under the mandarin's hat that he wore.

Wrenne, not thinking of the Japanese, dismissed the matter, and, giving over his horses to the care of Thsang, with instructions to remain by the gate, was about to be on his way. The guard officer—a Manchu

from near Yinkow, and a lieutenant of the line—stopped him with a deprecatory cough. Wrenne turned. The Manchu held out his hand.

“Chu’un and progress,” he whispered, as he turned Wrenne’s wrist so that the palm came uppermost. It was the agreed sign of recognition between those of the conspiracy.

“You?” Wrenne stepped back in some surprise. He knew the man’s family to be henchmen of the dowager’s father, the old Manchu general.

“I,” responded the officer blandly. “And all the men of my gate, Black-plumed One.” He paused, then in a lower tone: “Is it to-night that we may expect the three golden arrows?”

Wrenne shrugged his shoulders. “Patience is the heritage of those that achieve,” he answered in Confucian style. “Success is the reward of those expectant and watchful always. How may we know?”

“We are ready,” stated the officer briefly; then, saluting, stepped back and allowed Wrenne to pass.

Wrenne did not enter the yamen of Prince Chu’un by the gateway of ceremony. Most Chinese being plotters and conspirators, few houses in the Celestial kingdom are built without secret entrances and exits. It was through one of these—a gateway sheltered by a huge acanthus-tree—that Wrenne entered with his

private key, and found himself in Chu'un's outer garden. He threaded his way among the dwarfed trees and shrubs, through a profusion of flowers. The buildings composing the Chu'un yamen were very dark and quiet. The servants and retainers were mostly without in the Tartar city celebrating the Flower Birthday. Wrenne opened another gateway in an inner wall, and, passing through a paved court, ascended a flight of black marble steps to the very private quarters of the prince. He passed through a lofty-ceilinged rotunda, and knocked upon an inner door. A eunuch admitted him.

Remembering the officer's tale of the cloaked person who had entered with a passport from Chu'un, Wrenne asked the eunuch as to whether the prince had had visitors that evening. The eunuch shook his head.

"None, illustrious and powerful servant of the Son of Heaven"—with a bow only a little less subservient than that which etiquette demanded for royalty. "The exalted brother of the Great Purity has but recently returned from the Imperial Theater, where the players celebrate the Birthday of the Thousand Flowers. He hath commanded that none save thyself be admitted into his dread-compelling presence."

But Wrenne had passed far down the corridor be-

fore the eunuch had finished his sentence. A second door and a second eunuch, a third door and the prince's guard of soldiers, a fourth door and his own personal servant; and Wrenne was in the presence of Chu'un, who reclined on a couch built into the wall, eating lazily of Chinese sweets from a little tabouret at his side, and taking occasional whiffs from a cigarette.

He started up at the entrance of Wrenne, dismissing the sing-song girls who had been amusing him. His servant let them through the minor door, and was himself dismissed by a wave from the thin yellow hand.

"Eh, my black Wrenne?" Chu'un asked nervously, when the red-walled room held only their two persons. "Eh, it is well? Advise me, my Wrenne. I am stilted and stupid to-night. The hoofs of my horse killed a cat to-day—it is an ill omen. Her eyes were reminders of someone I had known. Perhaps a dead relative. You laugh, my Wrenne; you think me absurd—nor believe that the spirits of ancestors may be within the bodies of animals." He smiled patiently. "I am well punished for mixing with my Eastern temperament a Western sense of humor. Myself, I believe the cat was near related to me—therefore is its

death an ill omen. The humor of the West obtruding makes a mock of the real ego. And so—but—what of the meeting, my Wrenne?"

His hand closed over his aide-de-camp's wrist.

Wrenne told him in a few whispered sentences, and, finishing, took the bundle of rockets from his belt.

"Three golden arrows they call these. They are to be shot upward from within the violet city as a sign that the rising to-night has your full approval."

He looked at his watch.

"The night is spending itself," he added.

Chu'un twisted his hands. "Eh—my Black Wrenne? It is to-night, eh? Not too early—nor—but I do not know. I am a poor figurehead—is it not so, my Wrenne? With only you to advise me—you whom I know to be a friend. You I trust. And if it is that you say the affair shall be to-night, then—I give you my permission to pierce the night with your golden arrows—eh, my Wrenne?"

He laughed nervously.

Wrenne arose. "Within half an hour after these arrows go upward three thousand men will be under arms. In less than an hour Peking will acknowledge for its emperor only the Prince Chu'un.

"Enough!"

Chu'un was trembling.

"I go, then," replied Wrenne.

He paused near the painted screen that divided the room.

"To bring you a crown, Exalted One." Then, laughing, was gone.

He passed through several doors before he remembered that he had left the bundle of rockets behind, and quickly retraced his steps, the guards at the doors paying little attention to him, dozing as they were, for the most part, in their seats. Wrenne had a peculiarly catlike method of treading, and he re-entered the prince's outer chamber without noise, and before the occupant of the inner room realized his presence.

Chu'un's chamber was divided into two parts by a silk-paneled screen depicting a wonderful forest of cypress and cedar-trees, in the center of which the spires and roofs of a fairy city showed. It was the work of an artist of the last century, a marvelous bit of white, silver, and green. One of the panels was a sliding one, and through this Wrenne had passed when he came out, shutting it behind him. He put his hand to it, slid it back with his customary noiselessness and the key-panel of the screen, the fairy city, disappeared from view.

In its place Wrenne had the view of the red-walled

inner chamber, a yellow-robed figure face downward on the floor; and a liquid something trickling crimson on the white marble floor. Over it stood Ito Ugichi cleaning his sword very carefully with a square of silk.

His mode of entrance was quite well known to Wrenne, but for the moment he had forgotten it—a trap-door opening from under a rug seemingly marble, but really painted teak-wood. The secret way led through the palace along a narrow flight of stairs, having for exit the lifting up of the floor of a little summer-house near the wall. Wrenne seldom used the entrance. It was difficult of egress, and the abode of insects, rats and reptiles. He noted even now that Ugichi was covered with cobwebs.

Very slowly Wrenne realized the facts in the case. It was quite plain that Ugichi had killed Prince Chu'un, but the reasons for it did not come immediately. The shock of the matter was too great, for Chu'un had grown to be a very personal friend of Hamilton Wrenne, and it was not until he saw the sprawling, lifeless body of the prince that a full sense of his loss came to him. But for all of that he remained calm. Reasons—what reasons?

And then—quite simply they presented themselves to him. Ugichi had quitted the house of Hao-Khieou

just after he had left it—had known Wrenne's mission. Entering by the secret way, he had waited until Chu'un gave his consent to the signal of revolt. When Wrenne had gone, he had eliminated the prince. The revolt would go on in the name of Chu'un. When it was too late for the leaders to quiet their troops, it would become apparent that they were dethroning one emperor without another to put in his place. It would be the opportunity for a Japanese dictatorship. Yes, it was quite plain.

The reflections and waiting had hardly consumed a minute's space. Meanwhile Ugichi had looked up and seen the frowning black-browed man, his cloak of imperial yellow thrown over his shoulder, his hand on his crucifix-hilted sword. In the eyes of the Japanese, Wrenne saw something more of reasons—saw that at one stroke Ugichi had hoped to rid himself not only of Chu'un, but of himself, Hamilton Wrenne. No one had seen the Japanese enter or depart. Wrenne would have quitted the chamber the last visitor; and, the prince found dead after his leave-taking, the blame of his murder would be Wrenne's alone. The evidence was enough to damn him, both with the new party and the old. It took from the Japanese the last danger of notable opposition.

Ugichi only started insolently at Wrenne. He said nothing. He knew the quick brain under that well-groomed black hair, and realized by Wrenne's expression that his intentions were perfectly plain to his enemy. But he only smiled in his meaningless way. There was no cowardice in the make-up of the Japanese—at least not the sort that made him fear for his life.

He had two revolvers strapped to his waist, but he knew that a movement toward either one meant instant death at the hands of Wrenne. The American was far more proficient in the use of firearms than he. He could draw more quickly, and aim without raising his hand above his hip. Ugichi knew also that Wrenne had no wish to have a revolver shot arouse the sleeping soldiers and eunuchs of the yamen. So he continued to polish the blade of his sword with the square of silk, blowing upon it and rubbing it into a satisfactory glow.

Wrenne came forward, his eyes upon Ugichi, put one hand behind him, and slid the panel into place. Then, quite as the Japanese imagined he would do, his sword-hand drew the thin steel whizzing out of its sheath. Bending the sword by pressing the point upon the marble paving, he took it between both gauntleted hands, and curved it into what was nearly

a bow. Apparently satisfied, he allowed it to resume its natural shape again, and with his free hand unloosened his silken cloak. This he tossed on the couch.

"You wish to try a pass of the sword with me?" asked Ugichi politely.

Wrenne said very quietly that he did.

"We are evenly matched," resumed Ito Ugichi, with suavity unexcelled. "You are a famous swordsman—and I am a quicker man. Is it necessary that we fight?"

"I don't see any way out of it," Wrenne answered coldly. "If I had my choice, I should have you strung up and beaten to death with bamboos—after the dowager's favorite practice. I never imagined such a punishment justifiable—until *now*, you yellow rat! It's unfair to Prince Chu'un and myself to kill you honorably, painlessly. But it's got to be done. *There——*"

He lunged. The Japanese parried with perfect ease, and flicked a piece of skin from Wrenne's shoulder.

"And *there!*" he added, still grinning. "Not quite so much lacking in difficulty, eh, Meestaire Black Wrenne."

Sometimes they fought in the light and sometimes in the shadows. A niche in the red walls on either

side held two candle sprays, with yellow tapers gleaming out of their golden censers. These threw their light directly across the center of the room, where lay the body of the murdered prince. Wrenne tried to keep within the circle of light. He had been but lately a convalescent, and knew that it would be quite impossible for him to win by strength and endurance. He must have light in order to watch the eyes of the Japanese, and to give himself opportunity to execute a very cunning trick taught him by a former brother officer, who had been a famous *maître-d'armes* in Rome before the wanderlust seized him.

But Ugichi seemed to be intent in getting him away from the light.

The American had, save for his first hostile lunge, been entirely on the defensive. It required a certain thrust from the opponent in order to put the *maître* trick of tierce into play; and Black Wrenne left his revenge in abeyance while he waited for Ugichi to make the necessary opening. But this Ugichi did not do. He had a masterful trick o' the fence himself, unhampered by conventional teachings and strikingly lacking the things that Wrenne expected him to do. His thrusts were, for the most part, half-thrusts, having as complement a quick withdrawal and a turn of the wrist, sending his antagonist's sword splay-

wise and Wrenne several steps backward for each time he accomplished the turn.

It was not without a certain admiration for Ito's skill that Wrenne faced him. The fires lighted in his brain by the death of Chu'un and the trick of the Japanese to fasten the guilt of the murder upon him died out, leaving only the cold ashes of desire for adequate recompense. His smile matched the grin of the Japanese in its utter lack of meaning; but it was a smile that drove away the curves of his mouth and made them abruptly cruel. His black eyes seemed to slumber behind his half-drawn lashes, giving the face the effect of a pretending feline waiting her chance to strike, the brows forming a heavy black line across the forehead. With his cloak gone and in the circle of light, every muscle in his lithe body showed quivering under the tight-fitting uniform; and, as he abandoned the defensive, his movements were disconcerting in their apparent recklessness of position.

He forced upon Ugichi a style of fence to which the diplomat must either conform or feel Wrenne's sword-point. The tricks upon which the Japanese had seemed to place his skill were dependent on the style of sword-play necessitating a long reach. Black Wrenne, abandoning this, came closer and closer with

each parry, until they fought with their swords either high in air, or else turning like keys in locks as they came together at the hilts. And then, while in this manner parrying, Ugichi gave the open thrust which Wrenne had so much desired. Wrenne played his trick with a sudden, vicious baring of teeth—but without effect, and nearly with the result of having the blade of the Japanese pierce his shoulder.

Wrenne leaped quickly to his former position, and again their swords met one another.

“A neat play,” commented the Japanese. “But I have learned it, you see, *mon cher Wrenne*. I also have fenced in Rome.”

Wrenne was considering rapidly. He was losing breath and strength, and it was quite apparent to him that, his trick exhausted, he was no better swordsman than the Japanese. Nor did he wish to engage in hand-grips, for he knew Ugichi to be proficient in jiu-jitsu, before which his own strength would have very little chance of holding its own. The Japanese was a traitor, a murderer—and fair play was out of the question with him.

Again they came closer, and again their swords shot out in air. In that moment, with the points toward the ceiling, Wrenne did a bold thing. He released the hilt of his blade, and before it clattered to

the floor he fastened one hand about the throat of Ugichi, caught the sword-wrist of the Japanese with the other hand, and kicked him viciously on the lower leg. The Japanese went prone, with Wrenne on top of him. The same second found Wrenne planting a knee in Ugichi's chest, and twisting the sword-wrist under his back. Ugichi lay quite powerless. Wrenne's foot was planted heavily on the fingers of Ugichi's free hand, his knee held the Japanese down with sword-hand under him, while Wrenne's two hands choked the air from his gullet. He wriggled violently, pulling the sword from under his back. One of Wrenne's hands shot out and tore it from his numbed grasp. Without pang of pity, Wrenne shortened the blade and thrust it through Ugichi's throat. The Japanese raised himself on his hand with one convulsive effort, then fell back quite still. Wrenne felt his heart, and arose with a satisfied smile.

CHAPTER IV

SIGNALS OF CONSPIRACY

FOR some time after he had killed the Japanese, Wrenne remained quite still, wondering what he should do. His shoulders bent, his head on his chest, he pondered over the matter. What, indeed, was best? For the moment the fate of China was entirely in his hands. He had but to loose the rockets—but what then? Now that he saw the hand of Japan in the matter, was it wise?

Then his eyes brightened, and he regained his erect bearing. He would go to Bess, confess to her that he had strayed back into the crooked footpaths, ask advice of her. She with her clear, honest eyes must determine for him—he would watch the eyes to know what she thought. And he would do as they bade him.

He pulled away the rug, lifted the trap-door, and pitched what was left of the Japanese head first down the flight of steps. Very tenderly, however, he carried the body of Chu'un down, wrapped in the golden

coverlet of his couch, and laid him at the foot of the stairs. Returning, he threw the rug over the blood-stains, then closed the trap-door, and passed out by the usual passage

The servants and the guards had heard nothing. The eunuchs blinked sleepily as they made him obeisance. He went his way rapidly through the Chu'un gardens to the wall that opened into the imperial palaces, and opened the secret gate with the key given him by the prince long before. The gate closed behind, and he was in the Gardens of the Invisible Deity.

The moon was very bright, limning trees, shrubs, and buildings in lines of frosted silver. Lights were out in the pavilion of the Arbor. He hesitated as to whether he should enter and awaken Bess. She had probably retired. For all her troth to him, he felt a delicacy in intruding upon her at this hour. But he must have her counsel—himself he could not decide.

He walked the length of the gardens while he meditated, and came to the foot of the temple's hundred steps, which shone like a white moon ladder above him. Looking up, he saw something that sent, despite his courage, a cold shiver through him. One cannot live in China and acquire none of her superstitions. The door of the Double-Dragon, closed these ten

years, was flung open, and out into the moonlight had come a cloaked figure.

He stared upward. Then, the figure turning, a pale, white face was abruptly outlined in the moonlight. He had no suspicion of its identity. Only knew himself either to be dreaming or in the presence of an actual psychic phenomenon. Perhaps an omen—if ever man needed advice of supraliminal sort, he was the man! He mocked secretly at himself for his paradoxical thoughts, but, his mind made, he bounded up the steps, taking three at a jump, until he came to the level of the doors.

Now he stood within reaching distance of the figure. His eye took in a cape of soft gray, with two little blue tassels falling from the neck. The cape awoke vague recollections. On shipboard—yes—Bess! He looked again. How was it possible? The door of the temple was open—wide open.

He put out one hand, and withdrew it. The figure had its back to him, head resting against the door, rounded shoulders shaking convulsively. His ears became aware of muffled sobbing.

The temple door open—and Bess here! From some recess of his memory came the remembrance of Chu'un's recognition of the sketch the girl had made of the exiled mandarin of the white banner. It oc-

curred to him that her cheeks were flushed when she said the exile was dead. That mandarin had left China with the keys of the temple in his possession—and——

Bess—a thief!

This time he put out both hands, and the fingers sank deep into the flesh under the soft cape. He turned the figure around. He released one shoulder, and held up the girl's head by pushing against the chin. Her eyes streamed tears. She would not look at him.

"Bess!" he said, and in his blind rage shook her violently. The silver bag that she was holding fell from her grasp, and to the marble platform. The clasp came undone, and a hundred or more white stars seemed to have fallen upon the marble. Wrenne's eyes went down to them. In that moment he realized.

She was a thief!

In his anger he almost struck her. So this was the girl whom he had come near abandoning all his schemes for success—because perforce they were unworthy of the man she loved. He laughed, and the mirth had a bitter tang in it. Her eyes, weary, hopeless, met his.

"Don't, Hamilton—— Don't—don't——"

She stretched out her arms, beseeching him. He pushed her away with an angry snarl.

"You stole those!" he said; and pointed to the gleaming stones at his feet.

She bowed her head in sobbing acquiescence.

"You did?" he asked, a menace in his tone.

"Yes."

His teeth grated hard against one another. "You did—eh? You did. Oh, my God! *You* did? You *stole* them, did you? You came here and stole them, and you *meant* to steal them all along, I guess. You *did*, eh?" He was snarling again at her. "You *did* mean to steal them all along?"

Again she bowed her head.

Wrenne caught her wrists, hurting her cruelly. But the physical hurt was nothing to the hurt of her heart that came from the hardness of his laugh.

"And I came here to-night to ask you to forgive me because my feet had strayed to crooked paths. And to get *honest* advice. I meant to watch your *honest* eyes—the eyes that could not lie."

It was then he had laughed.

"*Honest* advice! *Honest* eyes! My God! And you're a thief!"

She moaned, but he was merciless.

"Now let me tell you what you've done. You see

those rockets? When I set them off, the Reformers rise! China will be in revolution. I came to you to ask should they send their message. If you had said 'No,' I would have obeyed you. Now! I'm for my own hand and to hell with honesty! You held the fate of China in your hand to-night—and lost your chance. Because you are a thief."

He threw her from him and she fell to her knees; but she crawled after him clutching at his cloak.

"No, Hamilton. Hamilton, for God's sake, no! I can explain, I can explain."

Her moan arose to a scream. For all his greater strength he could not loosen her frenzied clutch on his cloak.

"Hamilton! for God's sake—don't—don't—don't do what you said! Let me explain. I can explain. It wasn't for myself I did it. Hamilton—give me the rockets. Don't——"

Suddenly she fell face foremost at the foot of the stairs. Finding it impossible to loosen her hold, he had unfastened the jeweled clasp at his throat and the tension relieved, she had fallen almost at his feet, fallen amid the folds of his cloak.

He hurried off without a backward glance—hurried off in the direction of the watch-tower. When she staggered to her feet, she saw the tall figure outlined

in the moonlight as he climbed. For a moment it was outlined against the parapet, then, as he began to ascend the winding stairs leading to the watch-tower, the foliage of the tall trees hid him from her sight.

While she stood motionless, the face of the moon was hidden by a passing cloud. As its pale light was blotted out, she saw a flaming arrow rise above the walls of the Three Cities, cleaving the black cloud in twain.

Another followed and a third; three golden arrows:—the signals of conspiracy.

So that, when the cloud passed on its way and the moon shone bright again, it shone on grim-visaged men bearing arms—men from the North, the South, the East, the West. But the faces of all were turned toward the violet city.

CHAPTER V

DRUGGED

SLOWLY, painfully, still clinching the cloak,—all that was left her of her lover,—Bess dragged herself back. But before she came to the lotus-covered lake and out into the moonlight again, she passed through the patch of jungle and halted mechanically by the chu-sha-kih tree. Her hand came from her pocket like an automaton's and into the little knot-hole, that safe hiding-place where the keys had lain since her first day in the Arbor of Buddha's Hand, the keys dropped back again.

Then she emerged into the moonlit circle where the lotus leaves lay languorous on the lake and, above it, like squat green-black monsters of a nightmare, the dwarfed cedars arose and the crenellated green roof of the Arbor of Buddha's hand. Its carven red-lacquered roof-posts were like these same monsters' curved horns, their shadows sharply etched in the moonlight against the great gray pink wall that encircled the Gardens of the Invisible Deity. Under its

lotus leaves the lake gleamed like a polished silver shield. From its silver cage Bess' nightingale flooded the scented night with wave upon wave of a flood of poignantly saddened song.

"I forgot to let him out to-night, poor Kitty," Bess said dully. She had called her songster that because he was like poor Aunt Kitty, caged so long, yet singing so sweetly. She had to remember the poor aunties. It was better for her to be a thief than for them to suffer, the poor, poor aunties.

Now she must let Kitty out—let him fly to the top of the tallest cedar, and fly down and drink from the lake; have all the little pleasures he had found for himself during his little hour of freedom each night. So she quickened her dragging pace and came up by the little winding way until she stood under her window where the nightingale sang.

"Coming, Kitty," she chirped, trying to make her voice cheerful, and then, by another effort, came up the steps and into the Arbor. One of her attendants—she could never keep track of them, they sent her so many—slid open the panel for her. Bess remembered her now—that one with the fat sly face—Lu-Keng—the one she liked least of all.

It was only by forcing her mind to dwell on such minor details that she was able to keep sane at all.

The maid came forward to take the cloak she carried, the cloak of him who until that night had loved her. But she would not let her touch it. Nor the one she wore. In one of its pockets were the jewels.

"No, Lu-Keng," she said, sharply, and, going to the cupboard of her bedroom, she locked them both away and attached the key to the chain about her neck. Had she looked back she would have seen the girls' eyes light in a certain covetous gleam. This was the girl Ugichi had paid highly for drugging her with sweetened syrup of opium and searching her mistress's person while she slept. Lu-Keng's name had been furnished Sugiyama, along with others who could be bribed.

Lu-Keng was to earn her bribe that night—a fair different sort of bribe from the meager one she had paid another servant for the privilege of taking her place about the Portrait-Painter that night.

"Will the honorable lady permit the humblest of insects to prepare her for her couch?"

Lu-Keng was anxious that Bess should be abed and if possible asleep. And Bess permitted herself to be disrobed, her face, hands and feet bathed in scented water, and a cup of tea served her. She was too accustomed now to the odd taste of things Chinese to

suspect a soporific added to the tea. Her brain was too benumbed to-night to think at all.

And, because it was benumbed, the drug took swift effect. Once the lights within the gayly-colored lanterns were extinguished, she fell into sudden silent slumber so heavy that when Lu-Keng crept in and listened and finally passed a lighted candle before her eyes, she still lay as do the dead.

Soon she had her answer in the sight of two men, who, waiting for the darkening of the moon, crawled along, beside the lotus-lake on flattened bellies, and finally into the Arbor of Buddha's Hand.

Bess still slept—slept, while a cord, featherweight in quality but strong as steel, tightened about her ankles; slept while a sponge was thrust beneath her nostrils and the sickly sweet odor of chloroform filled the room.

When the moon sank behind the gray-pink wall, the two men crept out again, but this time erect, and in the attire of Imperial servants, holding the shafts of a palanquin between them.

They passed on to the little door in the North Wall:—the little secret door which had given entry to Hamilton Wrenne so many times. When they were through it and were in a servants' quarter of the

Yamen, two soldiers would have stopped them but they grounded their gun-butts at the pass-word "Chu'un and Progress."

Once outside the walls they pelted off along on the Great North Road that led to the Wan-Shou-san Summer Palace where the Barren She-Wolf sheathed her claws. And beyond to what she called her Pleasure-Palace, and others the Palace of Shame.

CHAPTER VI

THE PLEASURE-PALACE

WHEN the bonds that bound Bess were loosened, and the bag with the pierced holes that had enveloped her head was removed, she recalled dimly exchanging a sickly sweetish smell for one made up of various odors of the Orient: *ylang-ylang*, sandal-wood, and the variously scented incenses that burned in the high-placed braziers, one for each of the lacquered columns that supported the lofty ceiling.

She had found herself lying on the softest sort of couch and because she was a person who loved to lounge just so at home, she luxuriated in a long stretch and yawn before her eyes convinced her she was not at home and dreaming. The room itself was dark save for a swinging censer where a wick swam in aromatic oil. She had tottered to the window—Bess could not believe as yet that she was not experiencing some peculiarly vivid dream—and found that

the dim dark pagoda in which she found herself was set high above a grove of ghostly temples and palaces, before which the dogs of Fo kept watch—great stone griffins with bulgy eyes. The sliding lattices had been pushed aside to admit the clean, sweet, upper air that had brought her out of her unconsciousness.

Below, one saw ghastly gardens alive with strings of lanterns swaying in the wind, lanterns with the shapes of queer birds and beasts, while illumined kites like the lily and the lotus bobbed and danced and lit up patches of dwarfed green trees and the green roof-trees of the garden arbors. Color rioted on every side wherever light fell and it fell upon crenellated roofings, porcelain gargoyles, and lacquered goblins. . . . From that height the bobbing lanterns seemed too tiny for those of real folk. To her drugged mind they were those of marsh-gallopers; elves and sprites of the marsh, making merry in a fairy city that would vanish overnight.

From down below arose to Bess the tink-tink-tinkle of many stringed instruments, and, looking down again, she saw approaching through a grove of cedars a line of multi-colored lanterns dancing about on long poles carried by a laughing crew of sing-song girls. The lanterns illuminated their flower-garlanded heads and their long gold-guarded henna-stained finger-nails

as they struck the strings of their *san-hiens*, dancing and singing the while.

Synchronously by another path bordered by dwarf cypresses appeared a long procession of palanquins, preceded by retainers loudly beating on their gongs, demanding the right of way for their illustrious masters. The two paths converged and at their crossing the bearers knelt, and from each palanquin there descended a richly robed mandarin, stiff with gold brocade and wearing a crystal button or a long drooping peacock's feather in his helmet-shaped hat. Before each mandarin a sing-song girl bent the knee.

Bess' brain was beginning to be free of the drug, and realizing that this was no dream, reeled. She remembered with a sickened heart the tales of how such important officials were invited to a certain Imperial Pleasure Palace where they were beguiled, and furnished with all that sensuous pleasure-loving minds could conceive. If such mandarins proved to be troublesome folk and "too serious," she had heard that they would be apt to leave their bodies behind them. If beguileable, they left more than their bodies. Afar from the seat of government in Peking, the Dowager She-Devil had done more or less what she liked. Thus she had built up a machine.

For the Dowager had left the Wau-shou-san Sum-

mer Palace and had retired to her infamous Pleasure Palace in the hills of Peh-li.

Here The Brotherhood of the Harmonious Fists had been born. Here leaders had been made who had preached the doctrine of "Death to the *Fengqui*—the Foreign Devil." . . .

Bess roused herself by a violent effort. After a moment or so of dazed silence, she put both hands to her face to muffle a moan. She had heard of this terrible place, knew there was but one like it in any of the country near Peking, or indeed in Peh-Li province. She was in the Pleasure-City of the Barren She-Wolf! All who had lived a month in the Forbidden City knew its history and knew how Tze-Hsi, when middle-age had begun to fill her with fears, had drained a certain lake and there, hidden by four hills, had set thousands of masons to work to build her Pleasure Palace. Then, within its violet walls, she had gathered together all that the art and beauty of the Yellow Kingdoms could give. Such a place as this had never been seen since the days of the Cæsars. Tales, sinister, evil, soul-scarifying tales, had been told about it ever since its inception. . . .

Suddenly she realized that she was not alone. There was someone hiding in the shadows back of the great central brazier, above which a red glow outlined some

confused objects dimly. And one of these objects had moved, ever so slightly.

Bess choked back a scream. She had never been an average girl; there was something of the boy in her always. Somehow she knew it was a man back there and that he was looking at her although she could not see him. Now—was it possible or had she gone mad? She seemed to see swimming through the darkness two luminous eyes.

"I see you back there," she managed to say finally, steadying her voice to a calmness she was far from feeling. "Who are you and why was I brought here? What is this place—where is it?" She ceased speaking for fear of hysteria.

"Only look down, Miss Courtney," was the reply in English and in tones absolutely accentless. "Only look down and you will surely recall certain stories of the place where you are and possibly of what your fate will be—one so beautiful as yourself—if you fail me in what I ask of you. Or perhaps your imagination is lacking. Perhaps all that beauty below sounds for you no sinister note. If so, I have permission to conduct you hither and thither about the palaces and pavilions. Certain private views will, I am sure, afford you the information your imagination may deny you."

She stopped him with a gesture. She could see him now. He was a Chinese in a scholar's plain robe, outlined against the brazier.

"What do you want of me?" she demanded, a note of terror creeping into her voice. "Why did you bring me here? What have I done—what do you want?"

"Just one thing. The keys to the Double-Dragon doors. Inform me where I can find them and you shall go free the instant they are secured."

Now that he had nearly reached her and the moonlight showed him for what he was, not even the man who had sent him, the old Samurai in his Pagoda by the lake, would have known him for the Sugiyama who wore the Austrian-made clothes and carried the characterless silk hat that in those days might have been bought for half-a-guinea in The Strand. This man was Chinese to his finger-tips; yes, particularly to his finger-tips, long and gold-guarded. His eyes were hidden by a pair of horn-rimmed Mandarin spectacles; his robe was rich but of sober blue. On its breast was embroidered in a lighter shade of the same color the ideographs that betokened him an honor man of the Great University of Peking—a distinction that could be won only after twenty years of study. It is needless to say that Sugiyama had never won

any such distinction. But he was impersonating one who had; one long deceased, the secretary of another dead man, the Mandarin Li-Wung-Ki, with whom he had fled China.

He came closer to Bess now that she stood so silent. His total absence of personal feeling in the matter made him more sinister than one who threatened to gain his own ends. Sugiyama was so impersonal he was terrifying.

"I trust Miss Courtney will not be so ridiculous as to refuse."

"I have not got them," she answered in a low voice. "They are not here in China."

"No?" he questioned in the same commonplace way. "Then may I ask how Miss Courtney secured these?"

Lu-Keng had not seen her lock up those cloaks in vain. The key about her neck had opened the cupboard where they hung, hers and Wrenne's, and from the pocket of the first the gems had been taken that Sugiyama now thrust before her eyes.

"It is most unlikely," he continued in the same quiet manner, "that Miss Courtney carries about her person on all occasions splendid uncut jewels to the amount of a few hundred thousand yen. Besides these jewels were not in her pavilion when it was

searched previous to her capture. In any event it would be useless for her to deny that the keys are in China, for her brother, Mr. Austin Courtney of Washington, has informed us otherwise."

"Austin! Austin informed you?" He bowed. "My God!"

"So Miss Courtney will understand that we cannot afford to neglect any measure that will enable us to learn where she had hidden those keys. *Any measure!*"

She stood silent again. Austin had been a thief and a forger and now he was a Judas, too. Well, all the more reason why she must make up the general average of the family. Wrenne had called *her* a thief, too, but she had not really been one. What she had taken had been to replace what he stole. So it was Austin really. She would not have minded that. She was sure he loved the aunties, too. He wouldn't have wanted to see them in poverty.

But to give up the *keys*. That would be betrayal. And worst of all, to give them up to the hateful Empress-Dowager, the She-Devil who had misruled China so long, who, at last, was deposed for her deviltries! Hadn't Li fled for fear that the Barren She-Wolf would demand the keys? And to give them to her now would be to hurt the party of the man

she loved, the Reform Party. It would be to hurt Wrenne himself.

Sugiyama broke the silence.

"You refuse?"

She did not pause to think of the result of her answer.

"Certainly," she said.

She was near enough to see his hand raised in the back-lighting from the open lattice. Her own followed his movement and—so well could he see even in the dark—that he know that something had flashed in her palm before her fingers closed on it. But she did not use it, not yet, only prayed it would not be necessary.

His hand had gone up merely to strike upon a certain gong.

Another silence followed, during which the tinkle-tinkle of the *san-hiens* and the faint cries of merriment continued from below. It was a brief silence, this one; then the corridors outside became veritable moving forests of light. Men bearing torches and women with lanterns crowded in, revealing a lofty room of carven wood and silk paneling upon which were painted dragons, demons, dwarfs and peacocks. The floor was in blocks of red and black marble, part-

hidden by marvelous rugs. Rare and costly Ming porcelains matched their otherwise matchless hues.

The blazing torches carried by the men were thrust into wall-sconces. The women hung their lanterns from lacquered brackets overhead.

When the last was in its place, Sugiyama dismissed the light-bearers with a careless stroke of the gong.

"Look at them," he said as carelessly.

For all their rare and costly attire, Bess had seen no distinguishing badges of rank. Suddenly she knew these poor wretches for what they were; slaves selected for their ornamental value as sheerly as the rugs and porcelains. But of less value, apparently, for the porcelains would not fade, or if the rugs did so they gained value in color-tone.

While these poor human chattels . . .

As she watched them drift back to wherever it was they came from, she became acutely aware of certain terrifying facts. In going none dared turn his back or hers. They kept their eyes steadily on the man called Sugiyama, as do dogs when going through their tricks. But though their attitude betokened fear, there was no such expression in their eyes. It was then the first terrifying fact imposed itself on her.

The same expression was in *every* pair of eyes! Expression? Lack of it, rather. There was some-

thing wrong with these poor people, and whatever it was, Sugiyama wanted her to know what it was. His smile enraged her. But the rage in her eyes gave way to fear when she saw what he meant her to see. Fear? Say rather—terror!

His disquieting eyes held her. He smiled again.

"They *smile*, too. But do you notice they do not laugh—like this?"

With an abrupt and startling violence he threw back his head in a guffaw of mirth as loud as it was feigned.

As the echoes died away she became aware of the awful silence that followed. Yet all these poor people were laughing. They, too, had their heads thrown back. That general movement of the lips was one of mirth.

Yet no sound ensued. None!

"Look!" commanded Sugiyama, and laid hands upon the nearest man—boy, rather—a comely young Shantung Chinese. He opened the boy's jaw as he would a dog's.

Bess dared not. . . .

"Look!" again directed Sugiyama, and his eyes threatened her. This time he selected a girl of sixteen or thereabouts; one wearing high satin boots embroidered with flowers and soled with kid.

Docilely she opened her mouth at his command. And this time Bess Courtney looked . . . and quickly looked away, stifling all but the beginning of a shrill scream. For now she knew why all those who smiled could not laugh—or speak—or even make the noises that animals do.

She wanted to cry out to God, and sink down hiding her face in her hands.

Yet she stood erect and angry, seemingly unafraid.

The last of the painted butterflies kow-towed for the last time and again she and Sugiyama were alone.

But not for long. For, as she turned and fled to the window from which the lattices had been drawn, and would have flung herself forth into space, certain curtains swayed and parted and she found herself held by unceremonious hands and held so adroitly that even to attempt to turn to see who held her would have caused unbearable pain.

“You have your choice, fair lady,” said Sugiyama, as his eyes searched hers. “My Emperor and your Empress find they have affairs in common both of which are interfered with by your stubbornness. If you will inform me as to where I will find the keys, you shall have enough of the jewels to make you rich for life. You and your Wrenne both will have wealth to spend and to spare. You will reign where

women should always reign. In the center of civilization such beauty as yours is reckoned at its true worth. Come! Your Wrenne will not love you less—but more! For he will have then only you to think of and adore!”

“And hate, you mean,” came in her calm scornful voice. “As all true men—and women, too—must hate a traitor!”

“Do you think he will love you more when you are like those slave-creatures who have just gone?”

She shivered and was silent. Sugiyama waited. Conquering her physical fear, she faced him as best she might when strong hands held her from behind.

“Do whatever you did to them—damn you!” she said, and laughed at him—laughed to think that she could buy anything with that stolen wealth half so precious as the self-respect she sold.

In that minute Sugiyama came closer to respecting a woman than he had believed possible. But he mastered this unmanly weakness.

“As you say,” he bowed politely, “we *will* proceed!”

He crossed the room to the black curtain and drawing them and the sliding panels behind them, disclosed an operating table. A man dressed in surgeon's white garberdine, mask, rubber-gloved hand

holding a pair of tweezers was taking surgeon knives from an antiseptic oven and placing them on the operating tray a blue-robed nurse was holding for him.

As he laid the last one down and picked up a hypodermic from the tray, beckoning to the attendants to bring their prisoner to the operating table that he might give her temporary quietude before the anesthesia, Bess Courtney crumpled up and fell on the marble floor at his feet.

BOOK THE FOURTH

CHAPTER I

TWO DIAMOND PARROTS

IN those days that seem so remote now, although barely a decade separates us from them, Friday nights at the Hotel de l'Univers were events residents of the Tartar City eagerly awaited, especially the Europeans. For although the unclassed and the *déclassé* might not be invited to Legation Balls and private houses, none could bar them here. But two possessions were necessary; a dress-coat, or an evening-gown, and the price of a dinner—and Peking lacked neither dress-clothes nor spendthrifts.

An almost barbaric profusion prevailed. Tien-tsin being the clearing-house of the Manchu hunters and trappers for furs going via Shanghai to San Francisco, even the military wore fur-trimmed garments. So that, as they appeared on entering the hotel, men as well as women were muffled up in costly seals and sables, martins and minevers. Underneath their "British warms" English officers from Shanghai-Kuan

wore high-collared dark blue, with golden pips on their shoulder-straps and a width of scarlet braid to dress-trousers strapped tightly below spurred patent-leather boots. Beneath their Melton great-coats, fur-lined, American navy-men were in their heavily braided blue. A sprinkling of constabularios on leave from Manila, were very gorgeous with red epaulettes, across which sprawled the heavy gold bars of rank and the screaming eagle. One saw, too, French officers, always gay with gilt, officers from down Indo-China way; gray Germans from Wei-Hai-Wei, almost medieval in their helmets, cloaks and clanking swords. . . . Then there were the Russian officers from Newchwang, Port Arthur, . . . anywhere, everywhere. For in those days the Russians still held Manchuria. You saw then in the red of the telegraph, the blue-black of the navy, and the sky and orange tints of the cavalry and artillery.

Then there were the civilians; English, American and Russian merchants, long resident in the land of Tien-Ha into whom the spirit of the country had entered, grave, repressed, fatalistic. And the various members of the Diplomatic Corps, Legation staffs and the like. Although London was, as it ever will be, the standard for the cut of men's coats and the sober rich materials thereof, Continental ideas prevailed as

to dress-shirts and waistcoats. One saw jeweled waistcoat buttons that matched jeweled shirt-studs set between a pair of parallel frills in the center of elaborately plaited linen, or piqué or, was a man wearing a dinner-coat, of Chefoo silk.

Others than the gray Germans wore cloaks, cloaks held in place by platinum, gold, or silver chains; sometimes with jeweled clasps. Were these male cloaks not lined with fur, their linings matched the silk of their dress-waistcoats. The number of Russians present accounted for all this latter business. The younger Anglo-Saxons went as far as they dared to match their barbaric, yet often beautiful, idea of ornamental attire for the evening.

Here the women shone; rings, bar-pins, necklaces, chains—all sorts of precious profusion . . . that you may easily understand. To shine out in such a gathering proved a woman's beauty to be a sort of genius.

Yet thus a certain woman shone. She was an exotic, Oriental-Occidental type, Aryan so far as features went, but with an obliquity of golden-brown eye and skin of the rare color of wild rose painted on old ivory. Her name was Ysobel Arling, or at least so she called herself. And what her business was in Peking no one exactly knew, no one, that is, except those who

possessed those jeweled pins in which a parrot was represented in miniature.

Earlier on that same night, about the time that Bess Courtney returned to the Arbor of Buddha's Hand, she had pre-empted a strategic point of vantage in the Hotel de l'Univers' *Salle-a-manger*; one from which she could observe all who entered. Across the Friday night damask, silver, crystal, and cut-flowers sat a young man of no importance to our story. That he was important to Ysobel Arling is proven by his presence there. For he belonged to one of the Legations and knew things she was being paid to find out.

"It is strange," commented this young man whose dress-clothes came from that semi-circle whose circumference is Bond Street and Burlington Gardens, and whose diameter is Saville Row, "it is strange that none of the I. C. A.* chaps are here to-night. Corkey"—one whose income had not been sufficient for a commission in The Guards—"Stanislas"—an exiled Polish Prince—"Don Jaime"—one whose Spanish silver had been melted for the Carlists—"Hamilton Wrenne." The young man went on mentioning others. "None of them here to-night. I wonder why."

They were concluding with after-dinner cordials from squat cob-webbed bottles with dates a half-

*Imperial Chinese Army.

century old blown in their glass. The keynote of these exiles was enormous expenditure in unimpeachable good taste, and these cordials were a fitting aftermath to a dinner devised by a *Cordon Bleu* and served with a Burgundy that was a gift of the Gods.

Ysobel Arling did not answer. The dandiacal diplomat did not take this in good part.

"I should have thought you *would* have noticed," he said grimly. "You are always asking me things about Hamilton Wrenne. Do you know he has rooms here now?"

"Rooms *here?*" she responded, mechanically curious. Actually her presence at that table on that particular night was due to the very fact that Wrenne *did* have rooms there; a fact of which she had been aware for at least a week. Wrenne had not dared receive plotting Tartar princes, Manchu Red Girdles and Mongolian White Banner Men in his quarters within the Forbidden City.

"Why I imagined he would be compelled to live in the Violet City. Why is he *here?* Isn't he Colonel of the Guard?"

The young man nodded. "I do not know whether he sleeps here or not. But he has rooms here and gives card-parties. I attended one the other night." He had indeed. One of those innocent affairs Wrenne

was obliged to give to mask those that were otherwise. At the clubs a month or more since Wrenne had begun to gamble heavily before he took these rooms, this was to have been another reason for taking them.

"I wonder if he is upstairs now playing poker. That's probably why he isn't here."

"Probably," agreed the girl, who was quite well aware of what was to happen within the "Violet City" that night. So that when the boom of the great guns rose and fell, she was one of the few in the *salle-a-manger* whose manner betrayed no emotion.

The rolling reverberations from the forts' emplacement batteries, was followed, evidently from a great distance, by the intermittent crackling of the machine-guns and the resonant echoes of the attacking forces and echoes of their musketry fire. Then came the crash of bombs, and, after a confused roar made up of many sorts of explosions, silence, complete silence.

By this time almost every man and every woman who had not fainted was on his or her feet, and there was a rush toward the doors. These, however, had been long since closed, then keys turned in the locks. At the same time the shutters had been fastened from the outside, barring the windows.

The manager of the Hotel De l'Univers had had

his orders earlier in the day, and, accustomed to riots and revolutions, had safeguarded his hotel.

He now stood among his guests, a polite perspiring little Eurasian.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he called from the alcove table he had mounted, "it will all be over presently. Until then the streets may be unsafe. My orders came from the Forbidden City. You will forgive, please."

He climbed down and took his place at the small table in the alcove. When musketry fire began again intermittently and finally ceased altogether, some of his male guests became threatening and one or two excitable Russian officers picked up heavy chairs with which to smash the doors.

"Please, gentlemen, I ask you. But a few moments more and I will open them."

He spoke truly. A steady rapping on the outer door and a voice in Chinese monotonously intoning, caused him to give the order that opened the doors. Outside stood those who had closed them—a sergeant's squad under one of Wrenne's own men, the tall Manchu, Thsang. He it was who now indicated the newcomer, a messenger from the Violet City.

"The trouble is over, ladies and gentlemen," declared the hotel-proprietor. "You may go when you like. Forgive. I but obeyed orders."

At almost the same moment a Chinese "boy" in cotton-wadded blue came to a halt at Ysobel Arling's table. In answer to her inquiring look the boy indicated his palm held under the table so only she could see the diamond parrot there. The hand closed again and immediately hers hidden by her damask serviette from the sight of all eyes but the "boy's," opened and shut swiftly so that he had a glimpse of a similar jewel. He then handed her a letter from his sleeve and swiftly withdrew.

"Forgive me," she asked of the young man, and broke the seal. Within was another sealed envelope, a scribbled message wrapped around it. It was in code but she read it without difficulty. The translation was:

She is on her way to the Jehol. Give the enclosed to Wrenne. He will be at the hotel within the hour to consult with his allies.

SUGIYAMA.

She swiftly thrust the sealed envelope into her corsage.

"You must see me to my carriage," she commanded her young escort as she arose. To all his protests that he must see her home she returned a frigid refusal. He would have known why, had he seen her coachman turn his horses back towards the hotel as

soon as the young man's 'rickshaw was well on its way to his Legation.

Ysobel Arling re-entered the hotel from the rear and made her way to Wrenne's suite of rooms. Here she encountered the Mandarin Liang-Hiao, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Imperial Guard and Wrenne's right-hand man.

The Mandarin Liang, or Sir Lang as he was generally known to the foreign mercenaries, was a tall Manchu, the Commander of the Imperial Guard, and a Red Girdle Manchu Mandarin. He stood some six feet four in his glistening patent-leather knee-boots. Two or three inches of this, however, was due to his high *vaquero* heels, his small well-shaped feet being Sir Lang's pet pride.

He was a pleasant-faced fellow with a philosopher's smile. He had completed his portion of the night's work and had, on arriving at the hotel, received Wrenne's message that Chu'un was dead. Nothing more could be accomplish until the morrow.

The Reformers held every fort on the walls of Peking, the note told him, every gate of the Three Cities. The Emperor's palace was ringed about with Mongols and Tartars from the desert provinces. His Prime Minister had been informed of the death of Chu'un and the danger of a Japanese protectorate

unless he signed the decree that appointed Yuan-Shi-Kai Viceroy-General of the Empire and consented to rule through him and the reformers. Also to sign a second decree perpetually banishing Tze-Hsi to the Jehol Palaces, and forbidding her either to use any of her former imperial power or to return to Peking.

"Thus," Wrenne had told Liang-Hiao in his note, "an almost bloodless revolution has been arranged. And Chu'un's death is avenged. For the Emperor, knowing now what it was that Japan had planned, will be willing that Yuan show her no favors. Yuan himself was not personally concerned in our bloodless revolution, and he is assuredly China's chiefest man. The Emperor will undoubtedly sign the decrees in the morning. The Mongol and Tartar guards will then be withdrawn and my own returned to their places. And perhaps it is as well that the world in general should not know that there has been a change in government.

"So we cry checkmate to Japan. Dismiss the various Chieftains and await thy Wrenne."

Sir Lang, having read this for the third time, had closed the door and now was sitting in a great chintz-covered easy chair by the window, staring at the two steady streams of carriages, 'rickshaws, and palanquins—with an occasional motor or two—that were

departing from the hotel bearing officers and civilians in evening-dress or native noblemen and wealthy merchants. When Ysobel Arling entered without knocking his body had stiffened, and his hand flown to his sword-hilt, but he betrayed not the slightest bit of outward interest in her unexpected appearance.

"I had expected to see Colonel Wrenne," she faltered, at the sight of his grim face. For Sir Lang knew well enough who and what she was.

"Certainly, mademoiselle," he whispered hoarsely in French, "but you could not expect me to believe that he expected to see you."

He was grinning as he faced the woman across the table of the suite's reception-room. A certain snapping of his fingers before he spoke had brought them an audience. Looking toward the open door, the girl saw two of his cavalrymen outside, the hall-lights gleaming on the brass buckles of their accoutrements. Even the butts of their old-fashioned "bull-dog" pistols were of brass. But, of course, she could not see that as these remained enholstered. The men, after their salute, folded their arms and lounged at ease.

"Send them away," said Ysobel Arling angrily.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle," Sir Lang grinned, "but

I cannot afford to be suspected of secret traffic with the enemy."

So they stood, facing one another across the table as Hamilton Wrenne entered, and with the stiff, somewhat stilted Southern courtesy that he reserved for his enemies, bowed ceremoniously to the intruder.

"I came," she said coldly, "to bring you this."

She handed him the sealed letter, of whose contents, however, she was well aware. His eyes brightened as he recognized the handwriting of Bess Courtney. He broke it open.

The incredible contents of the envelope read:

Come at once, and if you would avert evil consequences for me, tell no one—no one. This is important, not that my life, which is of small consequence after all, should be saved, but that there should a cessation of certain severe methods of suasion by which my loyalty to you and to China are being put to the test. If the new day is to dawn, if I am released (if I am to be) and if I do not instantly take my own life for very shame, I must be relieved at once. If only they *would* kill me, all would be well. I can stand no more of their fiendish ingenious torture. If only I could go mad—but they are too diabolically clever to let that happen. Mad people forget and I am valuable to them only so long as I remember—remember where the keys are—the keys to the Double-Dragon doors.

This will be brought to you by one whom I have reason for believing is faithful. But certain circumstances make it imperative that no one save yourself shall know this person is

betraying the confidence of my captors. Tear this up and follow the bearer's instructions. Tell no one and come immediately.

Your Tortured,

BESS.

A stifled groan broke from the reader. Then Wrenne's jaws snapped together and his eyes grew cold and hard.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Ysobel Arling looked aghast. "Does the note not tell you to tell no one?"

"Where is she?"

"I will tell you nothing unless you follow the instructions in the note. I am risking enough as it is. Unless Sir Liang goes with you."

"Sir Liang goes with me. Where is she?"

"At the Jehol Palace. Unless you hasten it will be too late."

Ysobel Arling looked from one stern face to another. Then swiftly Wrenne outlined to Sir Liang the nature of the note and the possession by Bess of the keys to the Double-Dragon doors.

"You know her handwriting? No! Here is a note from her written yesterday. Read it—and this!"

He tossed both to his Manchu aide, meanwhile holding the girl with hard eyes.

"When you have read," he continued, still with his eyes upon her, "ride to the Violet City and rouse my squadron of Household Horse."

Ysobel Arling interrupted, frantically:

"No! no! Would you ruin me? I will lead you and Sir Liang to her. If you send for more, I will lead you nowhere. Now you know."

"Sir Liang," said Wrenne sternly, "have you read? What do you think?"

"A clever forgery—as far as the writing goes. For no American or English woman ever wrote such a sentence such as this: 'There should be a cessation of certain severe methods of suasion, by which my loyalty to you and to China is being put to the test.' The forger should have remembered that Anglo-Saxons for the most part write as they think: in short, tense clauses. Am I right, my Wrenne?"

"You are right. This is a decoy to draw us to our deaths. I do not doubt that the Portrait Painter is a prisoner. Of that, however, I will make sure. If she is, she is not where the woman says she is."

Wrenne's stern eyes met hers. She gave him back look for look.

"I come to you at the risk of my life—and the ruin of my career. The one that wrote that letter told

me that I might trust you. And you brow-beat and bully me and tell me that I lie."

"I leave that to better judges, Mademoiselle."

Wrenne's anger was still in leash. "And now it grieves me that I must do this, but unless you choose to reveal the real whereabouts of Miss Courtney, I have no option but to order you kept in the closest confinement until . . ."

"Until you deport me," she mocked.

Wrenne turned away, his face suddenly saturnine.

"Colonel Liang," he said, hoarsely, a tone that from him resembled nothing so much as the angry cawing of a sable-plumed raven, "you will assume charge of the prisoner and instantly take such severe measures as you may see fit to insure immediate compliance with my orders."

Luckily for Wrenne, luckily for Bess, luckily for the Mandarin called Sir Kay Liang, Ysobel Arling, suddenly startled, went through a surprising series of muscular gyrations, shivering, shuddering, twitching.

Several times she essayed speech. But it was not until Wrenne, Southern-like, concerned at the sight of any woman in distress, advanced upon her, that she achieved it. Evidently his wrinkled brow had the effect of saturninity to her frightened fancy, for she shrank, visibly shrank from him. So much so that

he could not interpret her inexplicable terror as due to what he had just said.

"No—no," she muttered. Then, as he continued to advance, not yet realizing that what he meant for re-assurance was being misread. "No, no, no!"

Her voice rose with each monosyllable until it reached its crescendo in a shrill falsetto shriek.

"No! Oh, no! You wouldn't do that—you wouldn't—you couldn't—you wouldn't dare——"

Her immediate pallor asserted itself all the more insistently because her cheeks remained so ruddy. Undeniably her rouge had been artistically applied. Until now, she had possessed an almost flawless imitation of that bloom supposed to be inseparable from youth. It was absent now. Equally absent was her usual impudence. The woman Wrenne saw was a gray-faced woman of thirty or thereabouts, scared out of her wits by some terrible threat.

"No, no; you couldn't! You wouldn't!" she cried again in *crescendo*, her terror apparently increasing with every syllable. "Why I thought Americans and Englishmen never did that; not to women! And now!" Her hysterical laugh lengthened out into a scream. "Oh! oh, what hypocrites you are—you—you—American swine! Oh, oh!"

She covered her fear-wracked face with over-

jeweled fingers that writhed like gleaming white snakes in the lamplight.

To the debonair devil-may-care Lieutenant-Colonel Liang of the Imperial Guard, Miss Ysobel Arling's terror seemed but a bit of mediocre acting. She could hardly expect to make use of such a letter as the one his Chief had received and expect to be allowed to remain at large.

Sir Liang hoped his Chief would not be so soft as to let her fool him. Wrenne had always defiantly declared himself against the use of women in the service and now Liang could see why.

He started to say something of this sort:

"What's her little game, Colonel?" he began.

Wrenne silenced him with an upraised palm, continuing steadily to regard the Arling woman. He knew her by reputation quite well. The least she could expect was internment and deportation. That, unfortunately, or otherwise, was the worst punishment Anglo-Saxons of his sort found it possible to inflict upon women who had not actually committed capital crimes.

But being in love with Bess Courtney and afraid for her, his awakened instinct of protection told him what Sir Liang did not know. He was certain that the woman's terror was not assumed any more than her

continued shrinkings from him. Why, then, did she shrink from him?

Slowly, as he watched her cower, he reconstructed the exact situation of a moment before—remembered that he had turned from the Arling woman in agonized anger. Well did he know that anger made an extensive, if temporary, alteration in his face. Once, when enraged (accidentally again, if you like) he had seen himself in a mirror, and had failed to recognize anything of himself in the singular ferocity of those mirrored features. Then, presto! it had changed back to his own and he had staggered back, first revolted, then afraid. . . .

Might Ysobel Arling's terror not have been due to that? But it needed more than that to intimidate *her*! Why should this pretty, soulless, little creature of the so-called "Foreign Service" shrink so from him, her body tense with terror?

Voice, manner, appearance; not one, nor the combination either, no matter how unusually sinister, and saturnine or what not, was enough in itself or in its combination to cause her to cower like that. Had they been accompanied by some dire threat, now! And at once he knew. He repeated the exact words slowly again.

"Colonel, you will take charge of the prisoner and

instantly take such severe measures as you may deem fit to insure an immediate compliance with my orders."

He paused where he paused before. It was a muffled moan that he heard now, but it began almost instantly to arise to a hysterical shriek again. Eureka! His surmise was the correct one.

Having previously assured himself that there were no mirrors to betray him, Colonel the Mandarin Wrenne deliberately winked at Colonel the Mandarin Liang-Hiao.

"You understand?" he demanded, cryptically.

But Sir Liang-Hiao did not understand.

"They have an idea," pursued Wrenne, contemptuously, "that we will not torture women."

Wrenne, having assured himself that Sir Liang was beginning to understand, studied her curiously. Here was the secret to unlock her tongue. Her amiable associates were about to be "hoist with their own petard." Her mind had been running upon torture. The letter was written to get him where he could have personal experience of such inhuman practices.

Yes, it was not only Bess who was to be sacrificed, but himself, too. Both the Dowager and Japan wanted him out of the way. And now evidently they were allied.

And now a few unconsidered words of his had put them both wholly in his hands.

"Sir Lang," he said slowly, "how long since Gorwitz has been below earth?"

Out of the tail of his eye he saw her fingers slowly unlock about her face. Gorwitz, Wrenne was well aware, was a Japanese mystery. He had been seen last in Shanghai one afternoon in company with one of the "ladies" that real ladies saw only on the Bubbling Well Road in the afternoon, their nocturnal divertissements automatically barring them from closer acquaintanceship. And that was the end of Gorwitz so far as Tokio knew.

Now Sir Liang knew as well as did his chief how Gorwitz had died that night, still resisting when the last shot in his Luger had been fired, for Gorwitz had stolen documents. But Sir Liang had been too well trained not to follow the spirit rather than the actual words when his Chief gave the lead.

"In this present prison place, you mean? Not quite six months."

"Quite evidently he must go deeper, then, eh, my friend? Our young lady here shall take his place. We are in more haste with her. With Gorwitz we could—and still *can* afford to wait."

"No, no," she moaned, and threw herself at Wrenne's feet.

"We are in no mood to waste mercy on you, Fräulein," he answered her harshly. "That is all very well in England and America where we have to fear exposure. To return to Gorwitz——"

"He—is—not—dead?"

Wrenne shook his head.

"Not yet. Or I *should* say, 'not quite.' In his case, you will understand, we had no cause to hurry. Your case is utterly different. We will endeavor to give you a lesson in how skillful we can be—and in so very short a time that you will be quite willing to tell us anything, *anything*."

His smile was so ghastly that she hid her eyes again.

"Take her along, Sir Liang. But first have your men tie and gag her."

When she unlocked her eyes at Liang's touch, Wrenne still smiled, but with the cold, hard luminosity of Northern Lights upon an icy polar sea.

A fit of shuddering overtook her.

"Tell her, Liang," he cried, lying, like one inspired to save the woman he loved. "Tell her of the torture, Liang. Tell her what we have done to Gorwitz; what we mean to do. Tell her of the subterranean

cellars that have served him for his living tomb. How now he lies in one so deep and so dark that the miasma racks his very bone. How, even if he had his sight again, and were brought to the daylight, the first rays would blind him. Tell her that for a year, when he still had his sight, we allowed him not so much as a candle. Go on, tell her, Liang."

But he knew, too, that Liang would never be allowed to tell his tale. As soon as the woman recovered strength enough to push herself up on her flattened palms, the haggard face, out of which looked eyes like burnt-out cinders, that she upraised told Wrenne he had won.

"Why did he not tell?" she gasped.

"He went mad," Wrenne said, simply.

"My God!——"

Hastily, the words overleaping one another, she told him of the place where he would find Bess Courtney, adding with frantic voice:

"Take a heavy guard. I want you to be sure to return. They expected you alone—by the gates. Go by the underground way and take men enough to protect you. Go! Go! It will not be fair to torture me because you are so slow——"

But Wrenne interrupted her frantic description.

"Enough; no more is necessary."

"But to find her—and protect yourselves."

"You are going with us," said Hamilton Wrenne,
"then we shall be sure that you will tell us the truth."

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSEHOLD SQUADRON RIDES LATE

IN Peking, as in other great cities of China, even a score of years ago, one could look over one's shoulder and see asphalted boulevards where in the show-windows of shops the latest song-hits and magazines from New York and London were displayed, and others flaunting the "last cry" in the modes the *mannequins* were then wearing in Paris.

In the morning, boys in cricket-caps might have been seen going off to English grammar-schools, wearing "house"-colors in their striped neckties; girls on bicycles on their way to seminaries for young ladies; dashing dog-carts being taken back by severely correct English grooms in buttoned-leather leggings and checked riding-breeches. Above the Legations the flags of the various white man's countries were flung to the breeze. From afar off, where the railroad winds its way outside the last of the City's walls, one might hear the toot of a Baldwin locomotive.

While across the narrowest, shortest sort of foot-bridge, one saw, and still doubtless sees, the narrow-

est, crookedest sort of medieval thoroughfares with houses that sag toward one another from either side of the street like stately mannered but dirty-faced dames of long ago. On such a street as this, in old time Paris, François Villon found the white in the dead jade's stocking. Through such another in the London of the Lollards, Jack Straw led his horde of Kentish rebels after Wat Tyler fell.

But although it was the first decade of the twentieth century of Christian civilization, Hamilton Wrenne led his horde through a street quite as crooked, quite as dirty, quite as medieval. And behind him rode a crew quite as picturesque as any whose horses' hoofs ever rattled over the cobbles of Armagnac France, or Burgundian, behind some stark commander of free companions.

Greater China was well represented in these troopers, known, somewhat satirically, as the Household Squadron of the Imperial Guard. They were as picked a lot of Berserkers as ever the Varangians were. Melancholily-mustached Tartars, Mongols high of cheekbone and almost noseless, flat-faced Chinese, but chiefly strapping six-foot Manchus from that province of which Sir Liang's line had long been the princes.

At the head of the column rode Wrenne, in his uniform of Imperial yellow, golden-frogged, his crucifix

hilted sword held in place by jeweled belt and a golden lanyard over one shoulder. Through an opening in his hastily donned tunic where a button had not been fastened, there was the glint of steel, a shirt of steel mail of goldsmith's links so fine that it could be crumpled into a mere handful. Another of his military cloaks bellied out behind him as he rode, companioning the drooping peacock's feather of his Mandarin's cap.

Sir Liang, who rode beside him was similarly accoutered. And save that their caps were of the humble black silk sort with red coral buttons, and they wore Mongolian boots of soft glove-leather instead of the glistening patent leather of their chiefs, so were the others of the Cavalcade.

It was about the same time that Bess Courtney awakened in that lofty room in the Pleasure City, that this troop rode out to save her. And when they paused at the top of the first hill out of the city it would have seemed to anyone at the foot of the hill that the moon had crept slowly from behind the clouds to hang suspended over their heads like a great silver-bright aureole.

In its light it was apparent that not two horsemen, but three rode at the head of the column; for, on the hill-top, when Wrenne and Sir Liang detached themselves from the others and turned their horses sheerly

to the right-about like reviewing officers, a smaller figure was to be seen between them. It was the woman known as Ysobel Arling, now boyish in shape and size, for she wore a man's habiliments. It was she who called the halt and had pointed out the way by which they would reach their destination.

Clatter, clatter, clatter! . . . Thump, thump, thump! . . . Pad, pad, pad!

And always the moon seemed just overhead and ahead, always climbing aloft and away. Until they came to the high hills, their shadows like those of great centaurs lay black on the silver white road before them.

And at last when they were as near to the walls of the Pleasure Palace as they dared go, Wrenne, his heart thumping hard against his ribs, had ordered them to dismount and hide their horses in the undergrowth below the crest of the last hill.

This having been discreetly accomplished, and the horses tethered in a little thicket, Wrenne wrapped himself in his all-enveloping cloak and directed the others to follow his example. He and Liang discarded their caps with the peacock's feathers and drew the hood of their caps low on their foreheads, and high above their chins like monks' cowls. Their officers, captains, lieutenants and sergeants (they had no

majors or corporals in the Household Guards) passed the word on to the men, until all were completely enveloped, only their eyes and ankles visible.

Before giving further commands, Wrenne summoned his officers to a council. Crouched in the underbrush, he outlined briefly the reason for the expedition and the necessity for someone to remain behind whose honor was impregnable against such assaults as heavy bribes.

"To see that our hostage does not escape paying the penalty. Should she have mis-informed us and should we fail, someone *must* guard her, *must* remain alive to carry her back to Peking."

The slender figure which even in cape and cowl stood out among so stalwart a crew, pushed her way to Wrenne's head.

"I won't be left: I won't," she announced frantically. "Let me go with you. How else can you find the secret way?"

"And have you lead us directly into a trap, that, as it snaps on us, releases you," asked Wrenne harshly.

"And if you fail because I have not shown it to you, you leave me here to be mercilessly punished for what was not my fault. No! Have a man at my back with a knife." she suggested fiercely. "Let him kill me the moment there is treachery. That would ensure my

death before I could get free. Wouldn't it?" But although Wrenne had brought himself to psychic threats, actually he was loath to expose a woman to physical dangers. Above all things, however, she must not guess this. So again he refused, giving his lack of faith in her as his reason . . . "so knowing your ground so much better than we, you might escape before we knew *where* we were. I dare not take you too near."

"Oh you are unfair, *unfair*," she sobbed, stamping her foot again. "Don't you see you might be unlucky—might not return? And then, no matter if I had done my best or no, your men would drag me back! No! I have said my last word. I go with you. Otherwise you may kill me but I will not point out from here how you may reach the palace by the shortest way."

Thsang, Color-Bearer and Regimental Sergeant-Major by right of being the biggest thewed and mightiest-muscle Manchus of the lot, pushed his way toward Sir Liang, saluted and spoke in English:

"Your permission to speak to the Colonel, Exalted One?" and turning to Wrenne added; "Sir, you have men here whom you have seen in hazardous service. We are a picked lot of a picked lot. Most of our squadron will be practically devoid of non-commissioned officers. Half our commissioned officers are

here besides. How might one of us dare show his face among his inferiors in rank and service and say that we had remained safely out of the conflict while our colonels, our captains and our brother-sergeants and troopers were massacred. Do not give us a choice between cowardice and insubordination, sir?"

He saluted and stepped back to his place.

"And while you waste time here," said Ysobel Arling passionately, "this lady you love may be——"

Wrenne's strangled bellow of rage was in keeping with the fierce fire in his eyes.

"Forward," he commanded hoarsely. "Deploy . . . as skirmishers . . . advance seeking shelter."

He added other orders, selecting their point of meeting as Ysobel Arling picked it out through his night-glasses. And then, when the others had gone on hands and knees up and over the crest of the hill, so that they would have been in sight of the watchers on the ramparts, had they gone erect, Wrenne's fingers sought the woman's shoulder in such a grip she could have screamed. But she did not.

"Go before me. As they have done. And hurry!"

The undergrowth swallowed them up. As Wrenne advanced, he found that the stalwart Thsang awaited him on the lowest slopes and from there on was never more than a pace or so away from the Arling woman.

They were in sight now of the red walls that rose about the Pleasure City—walls once red, rather cherry-pink now. . . .

From where he crouched and crawled, Wrenne could see the watch-fires on the walls, watchers in watch-towers, guards on duty, right, left, right, left—patrolling stiffly to and fro.

Ysobel Arling touched his arm.

"There," she said. "In that grove of ylang-ylang trees. Some of your men are missing it."

"Thsang," he directed, "your signal."

The low shrill notes of the N.C.O.'s whistle, swinging ever from a lanyard from one of his shoulder-straps, summoned those who had taken the wrong turning. Minute by minute, one stalwart after another crept silently from the chaparral into the little grove of ylang-ylangs, cedars and cypresses, in the center of which stood a burnished Buddha in its shrine, one of the four protectors of the Pleasure City.

The woman did not wait for the entire squadron to crowd it.

"Lift it," she commanded. "The secret way lies beneath the shrine. Knowing no native would dare touch the Buddha save in reverence, the Queen-Mother deemed this way impregnable. And doubtless it would have been had I not believed in the hypocritical honor

of the Anglo-Saxons who never torture women—if they are apt to be found out. God! How I hate you.”

“Hate away,” returned Wrenne, grimly. “But be careful not to betray. Thsang! You are a Moham-medan. Lift the Buddha from its place.”

The big Manchu strained his muscles. The squat, bland-featured Buddha was indeed a test of strength. Thsang lifted it with all reverence into the shadows, while Wrenne exerted all his strength to slide back the copper-sheathed slab beneath it. A wide passageway yawned below, step after step cut out of the chalky hillside.

When Sir Liang had called the muster-roll and all had answered, the signal was given and the men crept slowly to the shrine, leaped the barrier and began to descend the spiral stairway. But before their feet touched the second step, each man's hand was gripped by that of their Colonel's and held while Wrenne said “Good-by.” At no other time did any of them remember it to have been so husky as it was now.

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET STAIRWAY

“**H**ERE, here,” whispered the Arling woman out of a dry throat. “Here—feel along the walls—sliding walls. Quietly, for God’s sake.”

It seemed to Wrenne that they had traveled miles since they descended into subterranea. The spiral stairway seemed to run on forever; miles in and miles out of empty tunneling that never followed a straight line. Built so, he imagined. For in case of a hostile invasion, were its secret betrayed, each abutment would give shelter to a squad of rifle-men. At some points there was room enough for a machine-gun. Finally he confirmed this idea by flashing his torch upward above an abutment or two and saw imbedded in the chalk a tile of red porcelain with ideographs representing several numerals burned into it.

Being the invading hostiles themselves, never knowing what might be around the next corner, Wrenne kept his men in double file formation, a man to each wall, and two paces apart.

Nothing happened, however. Soon they had become so accustomed to the rise and fall of the ground, the swerving from right to left, that those who carried the pocket-torches were approximating automatically the position in which to hold them so that the light would fall always in the center of the unlit space before them. And all the while they ran with that steady even paddling of the feet that betokens the trained athlete.

Several times the last squad had been forced to halt impatiently for Ysobel Arling's feebler feet to follow Thsang. Then the giant Manchu swung her up to his shoulders and bade her straddle his neck as if he were a horse. She refused angrily, her face flushing.

"Then I shall throw you over my back like a sack and carry you by your feet," he threatened calmly.

Wrenne and Sir Liang were well ahead and those nearby only grinned. So she had no course but consent. After that they went on steadily, swiftly as the others.

After the first flight of stairs had been reached and Thsang set her down (remaining close to her elbow, however), she saw him several times in the light of the torches, whetting the broad blade of his bayonet-knife against a horny palm or testing it with his

thumb. Whenever he saw her looking toward him he did this and grinned at her. . . . When she was looking elsewhere the trench-knife hung in its place by another lanyard from his other shoulder.

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It was well for Wrenne that at the Pleasure Palace they turned night into day. Many of those who were not holding wassail in the little arbors with which the gardens were dotted, were watching the sing-song girls hold revel hidden among the scented groves.

But by far the greater number, having chosen their brides of the night, in the pavilions, were wandering arm in arm with them in the groves or sat on the rustic bridges by the moonlit stream that dashed over rocky defiles and dropped headlong from the hills, making their brides' better acquaintance. The majority of the majority, however, had betaken themselves to their quarters where everything had been arranged in the interests of what they doubtless denominated "love."

Here, each noble guest of the Dowager had in his suite a central court where on one side perfumed waters from a fountain gushed forth from the mouth of some naked male figure in some one of the postures of Oriental "love." Back to back with him was

a naked female figure holding a great lamp of delicately colored rock crystal over which another jet of water was diffused in clouds of perfumed spray, so delicate that it was barely more than a mist. As it crossed the closed lantern, as beautifully carved as it was colored, the mist became as roseated in hue as it was delicately perfumed. So that the circular court was both lit and perfumed by one roseately colored "lamp of Love."

The cascade that fell from the male figure's mouth and the spray that dripped from the female creature's lap both joined together in the circular pool below where its delicious warmth was retained by pipes at the bottom gushing forth hot water. Couches covered with piles of wondrously colored cushions stood on either side of the pool, and some of the unfortunate male eunuchs and female slaves whom Bess Courtney had seen in the tower-chamber were on hand attired only in breech-clouts, to serve the coldest of sweet-scented sherberts, or the hottest of hot cups of tea, lumps of sticky sugar, whitened figs and *mar-rons*, candied melons, preserved ginger, and Turkish delight. Others, when the Mandarin and his maid had concluded their languid floating about in the perfumed pool, waited to annoint, knead and massage their bodies with fragrant oils.

While others again, the most important these—graver folk in spotless white robes and sandaled feet—awaited in a sort of silken tent nearby, just wide enough for the Mandarin to lie at length on the couch, his head on piles of cushions, with his maid's shining hair within reach of his hand, while opposite sat the man and women in white; one to prepare the next pill of opium while the other applied the one previously prepared to the clay bowl of the great bamboo pipe, and held it to the Mandarin's lips—or the maid's.

This man knew just how much or how little was needed for the *euphoria* in each and everyone. He watched their eyes, their lips, the movement of their hands. To give too much or too little was fatal. To make a mistake in amount needed, to mistake and give pain instead of pleasure, might mean his death were the guest so influential a noble that the spoiled evening of pleasure disarranged the plans of the slave's mistress, the Dowager.

For it was her experience that wisdom departed from men properly drugged with sweets and scents and soporifics. And of all, the last was the most important; the opium *euphoria* which gave all things the appearance of beauty and even the most mercenary of sex-satisfaction the divinity of love.

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In such a place as this there must be necessarily few watchers to remind the guests they were under guard.

So such attendants as there were, in halls and passages were but poor weak things, servants rather than guards. Before Wrenne and his men had been in the palace more than a few odd moments, ten of the Pleasure Guardians had died in the dark. Nor known how they had died, so silently and stealthily had they been stalked by those crouching tigers, Thsang and the like. When Wrenne found out how harmless they were, he gave orders that no knives were to be used but that the poor painted sexless folk should be mercifully stunned with brass pistol butts. For Ysobel Arling had opened the mouth of a dead guard and showed him that the poor sexless creature was dumb. And, when Wrenne's rage made him speechless, and she faltered out some of the details of the devilish surgery that had made the poor painted eunuch sexless as well as dumb, and not always from birth, he realized from her terror-stricken tones something of the full enormity of what was planned for Bess if she stood stanch.

It was then he became a raging madman. Yet withal he did not forget he was a military commander. . . . Now, holding two stairways, none might ap-

proach or depart from the pagoda-roofed tower. The tower overlooked all points of the Pleasure City and was its inner mystery of mysteries. And Liang-Hiao, having heard Ysobel Arling falteringly explain, whispered to Wrenne as he stood on its stairs tales of the scientific atrocities that kept from its vicinage all not peremptorily ordered to attend there.

"Smite and spare not," said the Manchu Chief in the native tongue. "Men or women—none are innocent here. Remember the poor painted folk and spare none. I will hold the stairs. None shall interfere with justice. Even if it is the old She-Wolf herself—smite and spare not."

He saluted and went noiselessly down the stairs.

The thought of the pitifully painted mouths that concealed such malformity stirred Wrenne to insensate fury. Jerking at jeweled belt and golden lanyard, he tore his sword from its sheath of soft leather. It was the straightest of stark blades, razor-keen of point. Cut like a diamond with numberless facets, it had two razor-keen cutting edges, and stiletto-like murderous point besides. Did that point but enter a man's body the veriest child's weight behind it might make an end of him. With this in his hand Wrenne tore up the stairs.

The huge Manchu, Thsang, followed, herding

Ysobel Arling who shrank before his grinning face and drawn knife.

Now outside the lofty room at the top of the pagoda-roofed tower; now that they were so nearly at the end of their quest, she gasped in silent terror as she felt Thsang's hot breath against the nape of her neck. They stood in the hall, through the painted doors of which the painted people had poured that Bess might see how the She-Devil treated her slaves.

The doors were shut, the hall dark now. Even though the Arling woman knew every foot, she stumbled like a child in the dark, afraid. Within was he whose fiendishly cruel punishment she knew she must expect for her treachery unless he himself was killed. Without was the grinning Thsang and that personification of raging fury—Black Wrenne.

"God damn their souls," he gnashed out between teeth grinding together. "Open the lattice; open the lattice."

But the woman's fingers palsied with fear made impossible her finding and manipulating the hidden spring. His diamond keen sword, held bent between his two tense, trembling, gauntleted hands, touched by some sheer instinct the place where the door should be and it flew straight again.

"Thsang, the torch," he muttered. The Manchu's

eyes followed the blade, silver white in the light of the electric torch, and thrust his broad-bladed knife between the panels. A rending, splintering sound followed the pressure of his body upon the thick strong steel. As the panel was forced outward, Wrenne thrust the torch and the crucifix hilt of his sword into Ysobel Arling's hands and caught the outward bent panel with both hands.

The broad-bladed knife was thrust into its sheaf and to the weight of Wrenne's body and the force of his hands was added the terrific power of the Manchu giant's thews and sinews. His tight military tunic was rent apart and fell loose in two torn strips from his shoulder-blades. Almost at the same time the panel snapped with a sound like a bomb exploding. It exposed a space large enough for Thsang to push the girl through into the darkness. She had just enough strength left to point Wrenne's torch toward the sable curtains that covered the folding-doors beyond. Wrenne leaped in after her and seized his sword from her hand. Thsang was quick enough to seize the torch before she collapsed and they heard her body thud on something soft, then all was quite still.

Not for long, however. This second noise was too noticeable for those within to ignore. The lattice-

like doors of the inner room slid back. At the sound of movement behind them, Thsang's torch snapped out.

The face of Sugiyama appeared between the sable curtains. Instantly he dropped to his knees and disappeared. Wrenne's eyes followed him mechanically almost, if only to forget what the opening doors had revealed: a thing of horror. The operating table . . . a white-clad surgeon in a hospital gaberdine, opposite him, a skeleton-thin man in a blue-linen belted robe. Both had cruel high cheek-boned Tartar faces. The male nurse held fast to an anesthesia cap, pressing it down hard upon an upturned face. . . . Almost touching her, his face bent low, leaned the gaberdined Tartar, the glint of the operating light upon a thin slice of shining steel. Apparently only Sugiyama had suspected—and feared. . . .

It had been some time since Bess had recovered consciousness to find herself lying on the operating-table and to have Sugiyama explain what they meant to do. They had no desire to make her like one of the painted folk she had seen. But—unless she gave up the keys. . . .

Thsang heard the muffled sob of his Chief, the only man—or woman for that matter—who had ever won the fierce affection of this human bull-dog. He

plucked out the heavy, brass-butted pistol of the same name, and snarling animal-fashion through his bared fangs, let it bark twice. Before they had realized the danger in the disappearance of Sugiyama the scalpel fell from the surgeon's hand, the conical cap from that of the male nurse. He followed his cap to the floor where he lay face downward. From his hair there crept something like a dark and aimless snake, thin at first but growing thicker as it grew longer, zig-zagging across the polished floor.

As for the Tartar surgeon, he still held himself stiffly erect, staring. But Thsang's "bull-dog" barked for the third time within the minute and he fell on his knees, then, like a jack-in-the-box, shot up, collapsed and fell over backwards against the operating light. It crashed over with him, leaving the room in darkness again.

Wrenne had not moved a muscle nor blinked an eye since Thsang had heard him sob when he saw Bess lying there. His eyes, had not the kindly darkness hidden them, would have seemed as dead as the surgeon's, so utterly expressionless was their stare. Now, like a corpse galvanized, he moved swiftly, almost as if he saw in the dark. One knee bent forward, his left leg bent back diagonally, his left arm parallel with it, the hand flat against the hip—the

swordsman's posture—Wrenne lunged and the diamond-pointed many-faceted sword met human flesh in its way and pierced it through. The thrust had met the breast of Sugiyama, kneeling in the darkness, crouched ready to spring, and who now tumbled back with an inch or so of cold steel protruding from his shoulder.

Sugiyama never had the chance to use his own weapon. As Wrenne's sword was withdrawn, his clawing hands fastened savagely about his antagonist's knees and brought him tumbling down atop of him. Sugiyama writhed, blood pouring from his wound. The butt of the automatic he carried thrust in his high waistband beneath his loose robes, had deflected the sword-point from a vital part. But weak as he was from the loss of blood he had done the worst thing for himself—brought to close quarters a foe whom the sight of Bess had robbed of all desire to live, who had but one desire—to kill.

To this end he had shortened his sword even as he fell, and now, while Sugiyama, seeing his mistake too late, tugged at his automatic, Wrenne's diamond-faceted sword, handled like the stiletto its point so much resembled, drove downward through thews and sinews, flesh and bone, and the sanguinary flood that

stained his hand gushed from a heart that had stopped beating.

Then, mechanically, still as if he saw in the dark, he moved toward the operating table and took the senseless girl in his arms. Thsang, yet to know who had conquered, flashed on the light and saw his chief as he kissed her lips. They were cold, icy cold. He dared not open them. Another broken sob forced itself through his clenched teeth.

"Take her, Thsang," he sobbed. "The other man is in this room. Let me kill him, let me kill him—my—self. Take her to Peking—take her away. I trust you, Thsang. Leave the others. Take her safely to Peking—if you love me."

"One moment, my Colonel," answered Thsang, and as tenderly as any woman, the big Manchu motioned his Chief to hold the girl in his arms while he climbed through the broken panel. Then he took her from him and gave him the electric torch.

"But," demanded Thsang in his native tongue, forgetting his English in his emotion, "you—what will you do?"

Wrenne answered him dully in the same language. "Make sure no one is left alive in this tower. Only then shall I know peace, if—if——"

But he could not bring himself to voice his fears.

He dared not admit even to himself that he may have been too late! And if so, Bess—Bess—no! He dared not!

His hands gripped the muscles of the big Manchu's shoulder.

Thsang's voice was husky as he muttered his farewells and stumbled toward the stairs.

CHAPTER IV

THROUGH THE PEKING GATES AGAIN

DAY broke on a gray world. What little light struggled sullenly through masses of sullen clouds outlined the long weary road back home, which might never have been a moon-path for the little it looked like one now. A storm had broken since they passed that way and the great North Road into Peking was littered with saplings, bushes and branches of bigger trees sticky with sap. The road itself was one great morass filthy with the long-laid odors of yesteryear. . . . Through this the horses of Wrenne's troopers picked their way wearily.

They must have gone slowly, however, whether they willed it or not, for besides the drugged body of Bess, two of Thsang's brothers carried, across cantle of saddle and in crook of bridle arm, two of their wounded companions, who, having reached the limit of endurance were entirely unconsciousness of their rescuer's arms. . . . Others, whose hurts had not

been as serious, envied them this, at least. For every thud of *their* mounts meant misery.

A far different company this from those gasconading cavaliers who had come forth to conquer only a few hours ago. Bedraggled, spiritless, dull-eyed, reduced in numbers, with many more wounded, their desire for rest, sleep and food approached mania.

There had been an unexpected attack upon their exit from subterranea, an ambush of the Pleasure City's guards. Man to man, superiority aside, it must be remembered that only two at a time could ascend the spiral stairway. So that before there had been mustered a sufficient quota to withstand successfully so sudden and surprising an attack by twice their numbers, many of the earlier ones to emerge lay lifeless near the shrine. . . .

Death. . . . Death . . . death.

Wherever Wrenne's mind wandered on that dull gray morning he seemed to hear the whirring of the Omi-Angel's sable wings. . . .

The Lieutenant-Colonel of the Manchu mercenaries, the chivalrous Sir Liang, knew the prayer of his chief had so long disallowed his lips.

"I suffer every pang with you, very dear friend of mine," said this Chinese gentleman, and the two friends gripped hands. Liang's face was as impassive

as ever, but there was that note in his voice that could neither be assumed nor successfully imitated. And there had been few who had called it forth.

But at last their horses' hoofs rattled on the bridge and under the high pagoda-ed roof of the Great Gate of Peking. And when Wrenne dismounted from his horse at the hotel and took Bess from the arms of Thsang, Sir Lang drew up his men, their sabers at salute as he passed from among them.

He turned and faced them. "Thank you, my friends," he said, brokenly.

CHAPTER V

BY HER BEDSIDE

AN hour later, the doctors having long since gathered at her side, Wrenne sat outside Bess' door shivering in the shadows. Finally unable to bear the torture of waiting any longer, he opened the door softly and went in. A shaded light on a night table (the curtains were drawn) showed the girl's pale face among the pillows.

How little and frail, fragile and perfect, she looked lying there, the curling lashes of her tightly locked eyes like silken brush strokes of some marvelous painter; her locked lips, too, the pale crimson of a Japanese rose; the dusky wild strawberry bloom and olive brown of her cheeks like old ivory—tawny ivory of an ancient miniature. One bare arm brown enough and of peach-bloom roundness lay listlessly across the soft silken black brocade that covered sheets soft and white and warm blankets, blankets woven of the fleece of the softest, youngest baby lamb—all these

brought from Wrenne's own bed in the Arbor of Buddha's Hand.

On one side sat Van Duykinck, the American doctor and on the other the English surgeon, Erasmus Bertram, M.R.C.S., into whose keeping Wrenne had long since delivered Bess. An American nurse in uniform hovered uneasily nearby. With Bertram on the other side, was a motherly old English woman, his unofficial assistant. At the foot of the bed one of Wrenne's chief allies among the Reformers, Chung, a grave and reverend monk of Dalai Lama's own Lamassery sat cross-legged, his back to the foot-board, eyes turned upward, fingers busy with an ancient and elaborate bit of inlaying called a "prayer-wheel." Almost obscured and beside the drawn curtain through which filtered the dusk of the gray morning, was Thsang, stoic-eyed, impassive faced, furtively feeding with prayer-papers the sullen red glow of a swinging iron brazier in which burned charcoal and above which a pan of water bubbled that was sterilizing the English surgeon's glass syringe and steel needles. . . .

Slowly Wrenne crept closer to the bed. The American vacated his place as he approached, refusing to meet his gaze. Bertram also turned away, joining

Van Duykinck in the farthest shadows. But all, he knew, high or humble, watched him, shared his woe. . . .

He leaned across to look at her more closely.

"Bess," he muttered hoarsely. "Forgive me, oh God . . . forgive me—for what I said that night—Bess." And then like the sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale, her silken lashes trembled, her eyelids fluttered like frightened butterflies. Her dark brown eyes like woodland pools deep in sedge, the starlight on them, were suffused with an even darker look of pain and suffering.

The sight of him seemed to trouble her, stirred something deep down . . . half-forgotten.

"Hamilton, did you say you—forgave?"

Her lips quivered and barely moved; that was all. But somehow he heard what she had hardly whispered. And when her eyelids drooped again, two tears, like tears of blood, forced their way from their corners. The curling, silken lashes, suddenly wet, lay closer to her cheeks, almost as if they were painted there.

"I forgive? Bess, it is for you to forgive—you . . ."

Suddenly he realized he had deceived himself; she

had not spoken; he had only thought she had; it was the sort of delusion pain-wracked minds are apt to have.

"Did she speak? Did she?"

Neither Van Duykinck nor Bertram answered, but the American took her pulse and nodded to the Englishman, who rubbed her arm with alcohol and injected morphine from the glass syringe.

"Let her rest a moment. Then if you will try to get her to open her mouth at least—even—even if she does not speak!" He heard Bertram whisper it as from afar. In the silence that followed, Wrenne heard Thsang repeating in low savage tones, some barbaric prayer to Kwanyin, and, as if in fear, Bess' hands, those small capable hands, helpless now, fluttered toward Wrenne. As they clung, clammy with the chill of fear, his voice rose and fell on a single poignant note of animal pain.

". . . Even if she does not speak."

He turned to his fellow American. "Can she speak? Do you know the—" he could not say it—"the extent of her injury—and what can be done?"

"We have tried to find out ever since we were summoned," Van Duykinck whispered, "but she keeps her teeth tightly set. Her mind is like an infant's

again. She does not remember us. You have been the only one she recognizes, and even you she's evidently puzzled about——"

Thus the American. To which his English *confrère* added:

"She may be bleeding internally. How can we tell? Speak to her as you would a child. She recognizes your authority. We dare not attempt to force her—with such a terrible injury. Yes, Thsang has told us."

"Damn and double damn and God damn their souls," the American broke in harshly.

"I will speak to her again," whispered Wrenne. His voice was that of an old and broken man. He pressed her cold hands.

"My darling, my darling. Let the doctors see. Speak to me; only open your mouth—open it and try, won't you, for my sake."

Obediently she unlocked her lips to obey him.

"Now Bertram, now Van Duykinck—please," he sobbed, and turned his head away. Then he released her hands. Her pale lips quivered and again tears came to her eyes.

He heard the low-pitched persuasion of the doctors. Evidently she had acceded. Some technical instructions followed from Bertram. Van Duykinck was

focusing the tall contrivance that would send a concentrated ray into her mouth and throat. Wrenne could see the ray travel swiftly back and forth on the ceiling like a sun-glass in the hands of a boy. Then . . . evidently . . . it was focused.

Wrenne stood as one stricken into stone. He could sense the fact that no one was breathing . . . no one.

A startled exclamation from Bertram; a jubilant cry from Van Duykinck; a duet of incredible amazement. Silence again; the heavy intakes of breath on the part of all in the room.

"In God's name——" Wrenne began, not daring to turn around. His shoulder was suddenly twisted, himself twirled around, Bertram on one side, the American on the other.

"Look," cried the latter, "look—look—look."

Without so much as "by your leave," he put one knee on the great bed and opened Bess' mouth 'twixt thumb and forefinger. As obediently as any child of six, she obeyed his order to keep it open, looking eagerly at Wrenne as if to make sure she was pleasing him.

Wrenne stared. Stared piteously, afraid of not understanding, afraid to try to understand.

"But—but—she cannot speak. You saw her try. They——"

The American crossed swiftly to Wrenne's side to explain their theory. He spoke in tones too low for her to hear.

"Evidently you came just in time . . . probably just about to operate . . . was the anesthetist . . . I thought so . . . hold the cone . . . you would have remembered if the surgeon's scalpel had been stained, wouldn't you? . . . you see now, eh?"

To each and every question of the American's, Bertram, who had crossed to Wrenne's left, nodded affirmation.

"But you must understand, old dear, that her last awful thought was that she would never be able to speak again, d'you see, old thing? That is all that is wrong—quite."

Thus the overjoyed Englishman.

"But she cannot——"

"Quite! Quite. But you see, old dear, she—well so to speak—her brain is still anesthetized. A type of temporary amnesia, not exactly uncommon. Until she comes out of it—and Van and I will immediately telegraph Charcot and the other Johnnies sharp—and do our best to overcome this *idée fixe*—so to speak."

"You see," explained Van Duykinck again, "she believes she can't speak. And she will have forgotten everything and everyone except—apparently—you." But Wrenne heard no more. His face buried in the pillow beside her, he had quietly fainted.

CHAPTER VI

TOGETHER ON THE GRAND CANAL

A MONTH or more after the bloodless revolution of which few without the walls of the Three Cities were aware, and not many within, a Chinese house-boat was sweeping along the Grand Canal. It was propelled by a squat *you-lou*, or sweep in the stern, which took the place of both oars and rudder and was operated by barefooted men who worked in shifts of four that were changed every hour by the *laouta* or captain. He, himself, took *his* orders from the big Manchu Thsang. When there was any wind, which was not often, the great lateen sail, dyed red, shaped like a leg of mutton, whose spars were fastened midway along a stout young pinetree mast, bellied forward and flapped sideways and the *you-lou* men ceased from their perspiring labors.

It was a comfortable craft, shaped like any ordinary pleasure junk outside, but with plate-glassed curtained windows enclosing the living quarters of its

owner and his wife—an invalid who had been carried aboard and who now lay on a many-cushioned couch on the shady port side of the salon. The glass section that walled it in had been released by the catch and hung diagonally. Its silken curtains drawn aside, she could see, from where she lay, all the life of the Grand Canal, that great artery of China.

Boats—boats—boats. Compared to the Grand Canal, the Erie is but a brooklet where boys sail toy boats. There were the kickaway boats propelled by treadmills like the paddles of old Mississippi steamers; treadmills propelled in their turn by the naked feet of slaves. There were the big silk and rice junks, huge, clumsy, high pooped, like the caravels the brothers Pinzon furnished Columbus. There were the *tanka* girls in their sampans, a type of clumsy row-boat, and the sing-song girls in their gilded water chariots, lounging luxuriously upon brilliant cushions beneath gorgeously dyed awnings. More than often both of these received flatteries and profitable inquiries from the glittering mandarin boats. These were big flat-bottomed affairs; their glass windows painted with cranes and peacocks and dragons. Behind one of these sat the Mandarin himself, either ham-faced and clean-shaven or thin and wizened with long straggling Tartar mustaches; his hat like an inverted

bowl ornamented with the crystal button or peacock's feather or the like, his hand with finger-nails several inches long and protected by guards like the little gold caps with which dentists cover defective teeth.

The invalid, wife of the owner of the big *yantsu* junk, from where she lay on the couch saw these hands with the gold-guarded finger-nails, point frequently the fan they held so languidly in the direction of some carmine, red-cheeked, green-jaded, glossy black-haired sing-song girl, whose henna-stained finger nails plucked at the strings of her *san-hien*. And, remembering the painted folk of the Pleasure Palace, Bess Courtney turned her head away.

No, not Bess Courtney. She had another name now, the same as that of her companion, the man who sat on the silken rug at her feet, one hand holding hers. Together during hours of silence, they had watched the life of the river, and that of the flat surrounding country, long stretches of green rice-fields with tiny canals everywhere like streaks of silver when the evening shadows fell. Here and there was a *pi-lo*, a stone obelisk like a finger pointed to heaven—which was what it was, intended to be; for it was there to keep devils away. Or else there was an ornamental arch leading to a green pleasance above the river, and gayly painted and set down amid dwarf cypress trees.

And every ten miles or so was an Arbor, a resting place for the rich; a flight of stone steps, the lowest one submerged except at low tide, or green with river slime; and leading to an inn, approached through four pillars of imitation red lacquer, holding up a crenelated green roof that curved downward to meet them, its eaves within easy reach of the hand.

It was nightfall before either Bess or Wrenne spoke, save for a "Yes" or a "No." It was she who finally broke the silence.

"So you risked your life—for me—a thief——"

"Don't, Bess!"

"And married me before I could explain; married me while my mind was like a child's—and might have remained so forever. Hamilton, Hamilton—what a trump you are, my dear. I'm not worthy of you——"

"Don't Bess, don't. It is I who am unworthy. I——"

She closed his lips with her kisses.

"I never knew men could love like that. Women, yes; it is their affair, love. But—me? Don't you want me to explain *now*, dear one; explain how I came to be the thief you called me——"

"Can't you ever forgive me for that?" he broke in, hoarsely. "Bess——"

"Wait, Hamilton! You were right. I was a thief.

But I can explain." She silenced him with an up-raised hand. "Yes," a still, small voice went on, "I *can* explain. That Chinese whose picture I painted was the Chinese I took home—at Roland Park that day. The first time I ever saw you, Black Wrenne—you *do* remember?—years ago. Yes, the one Chu'un spoke of—the exiled mandarin. And he gave me the keys. You knew that. I told you long ago. Afterward he died. Well, it was like this. Before I thought of coming here, I found that Austin had taken money given him by my aunts—all they had—and lost it in speculation. We were very poor. I couldn't make it up—and it was all they had, the poor old dears. And Austin asked me to—use the keys. I didn't want to use them, Hamilton. I didn't want to; indeed, I didn't. But then came this chance to paint the picture—and—I didn't refuse. Can't you see? It was the family shame—and the two old women—my aunts! And so I came. And then I—grew to love you, Hamilton, and I couldn't bring myself to use them—couldn't. But while you were wounded I thought of our prospects—how little we would have if you quitted China. And—oh—things were so unsettled. And there are so many dependent on me. So I went that night to the temple and took them—not many—only enough to repay Aunt Malvinia and

Aunt Kitty, and something over for us to use. Can you see—and forgive? After all we promised one another that glorious night, we discovered that we—cared.”

He raised the sleeve of his coat and brushed his eyes.

“There must be mutual forgiveness,” he answered at length. “It seems both of us promised too much that night we found we loved one another. Promised more than we could fulfill. We made a mistake—imagined our natures were to be utterly changed. When I came out of my illness, I, too, wondered what we should do away from China—saw a black future for us both. And so I went on with plotting. I——”

He faced her.

“Yes, I did. I who raved and frothed when I found you on the steps of the temple; I who denounced you—God forgive me—as a thief before giving you a chance to explain; I—I—had gone back on all I had promised you and had gone on with the plot. The date of rising was set for that very night. I carried the rockets in my hands which would give the signal for the Reformers to rise throughout the Three Cities. I loved you dearly. I wanted you and power too. The stars put strange fancies in our heads that night—let us blame it on the stars.”

She put both hands on his shoulders.

"Hamilton, you do love me, don't you?"

He took her in his arms and his lips met hers—hungrily.

"You see, Bess," he went on, "it was neither the ideal nor the physical. I couldn't have loved the ideal—for you aren't the ideal any more than I am, but I love you just as much. We have confounded love with a lot of musty platitudes. I don't love you because you're good, or clever, or beautiful—but just because you're Bess; and you—well, I suppose you must love me for just the same reason. But we weren't satisfied with the beautiful thing that love is in itself. We had to tack on morals and fine frenzies, and copy-book maxims—when the real thing is so far beyond our realization that when we tell one another of it, we've only three puny, paltry, little words: words cheapened and debased for thousands of years, by every lecherous rascal in the world."

"The three little words are enough," she breathed "when you say them, dear."

When she looked up at him he spoke, telling her of the plot, the occurrences of the night, the deaths of Chu'un and Ugichi; touched lightly on her rescue; her loss of all memory except her remembrance of him; their marriage when the doctors said her memory

might sleep for years; its awakening that morning—while she lay in his arms.

“And now,” he concluded, “Peking, all China, is ours—for the moment that is. Old Yuan-Shi-Kai, China’s greatest man since Confucius, rules in the name of our weakling Emperor. On the surface all is the same. The new China is with us: the men educated overseas, at Oxford, Harvard, St. Cyr. Not damn fool democrats, thank God. China will never split on *that* silly rock. Not democratic donkeys, but benevolent autocrats, men whose one thought is to give the best that is in them to their country. Since the Old She-Wolf’s attempt to murder her old-time puppet, Kwang-Hsu, has been discovered (we permitted her assassin to get within reach of the Emperor—apparently—before we nabbed him); Tze-Hsi is practically a prisoner. Her Pleasure-Palace has been taken from her and she is shut up in the Jehol—afar from Peking. She will never harm us again.”

“And the Emperor?”

“Poor puppet!” said Wrenne somberly. “But he will be happier now than he ever was before. The world at large will never know that Kwang-Hsu was forced, practically, to abdicate his throne. In the sight of the world he will continue emperor—but over

a different China. For China will be rid at last of the harpy, Tze-Hsi, who has sucked its blood for so long."

He laughed whimsically as he turned his face to her.

"And so good comes out of evil, little girl. Good for China out of my evil and yours. It's only an ethical thing, this question of right and wrong. We are safe only when we follow our strongest instincts. If I had abandoned my share in the plot, China would have been given over to Japan. Had you renounced your theft, you would have brought starvation and dishonor on your family. And for what? That a pair of idealistic fools—ourselves—might drift aimlessly about the world and commend our consciences!"

He reflected for a long time as day faded into the luminous dark of a night of stars, their light reflected on the water in long broken lines like that of the boat's multi-colored lanterns.

"And in time," he said reverently, "when the people have learned enough, there will be some sort of a real republic—a bloodless one, please God. And it comes so much the sooner—because I—we—were not—ethical, Bess."

"Thank God we were not!" she said, soberly. "Thank God for the good that came out of our evil! And thank God that what we love in one another is what we are—a willful woman, a heavy-handed man!"

We do love one another for just that—*don't* we, dear?"

He raised her hands to his lips, and they sat for a long time in the starlit darkness, his head still bowed over them.

THE END

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